



January 2024

Illustrating Thoughts & Feelings: Student-Produced Political Cartoons About Israel

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Recommended Citation

Reingold, Matt (2024) "Illustrating Thoughts & Feelings: Student-Produced Political Cartoons About Israel," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 8, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss8/1>

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APA Style

Introduction

The genesis for the present study is my own experience studying and teaching about contemporary Israeli society and researching best practices in Israel education. During the 2022-2023 academic year, I began showing my Grade 12 students recent Israeli political cartoons to teach them about current events in the country. The cartoons proved valuable in introducing students to the complexities of Israeli society through the contrasting perspectives offered by the different cartoonists. Concurrent with this new and well-received way of teaching were the onset of feelings of inertia towards assigning my students yet another written project that would assess their understanding of what had been learned. Even as I readied to supply my students with the written assignment, I started thinking about what my curricular goals were and whether they could be accomplished through alternative means. Thus began a rapid and on-the-fly pivot to have my students become like the cartoonists they were studying. I rewrote the assignment, asking students to produce their own political cartoon about Israeli society that would draw upon topics we had studied in class.

The following paper presents the findings of a qualitative research study into the use of political cartoons as an arts-based assessment strategy in the teaching of Israel. In formulating a research agenda, I sought to understand whether and to what extent an arts-based assessment provided students with the impetus to formulate their own thinking about Israel. As well, I wanted to assess whether pedagogical strategies like teacher conferences and curricular approaches like teaching with cartoons played a role in facilitating students' abilities to create their own cartoons.

Literature Review

Arts in Education

Integrating arts-based learning into a curriculum provides students with opportunities to exercise their imaginations to practice creativity, and to solve complex problems in new and novel ways. As Maxine Greene (2001) has suggested, engaging students in arts-based learning allows them “to enter a created world, an invented world, . . . to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-granted realities of everyday” (p. 82). Learning in this way allows students to “challenge the taken-for-granted ... break with confinement, look from an increasing number of vantage points – realizing that the world is always incomplete” (Greene, 2001, p. 84). This incompleteness can lead students to understand that “the construction is never complete” (Greene, 2001, p. 130) and that they, too, have a role in moving society further toward completeness. Greene’s understanding is that the arts, as a vehicle for creative thinking, provide students with the impetus to begin envisioning alternative realities and to see the world in ways that do not always mirror the present. Creating can untap new ways of thinking about the world and seeing solutions to present problems.

One of the unique features of the arts is their ability to facilitate a creative and imaginative process wherein the artist is able to express their own understanding of a given topic. As Elliot Eisner (2004) has noted, “the arts, if they are about anything, are about the creation of a personal vision” (p. 44). To Eisner, the opportunity to present a personal vision necessitates a reimagining of the world and its constituted realities and to see in society something other than the current predicaments. Eisner suggests that what is gained by way of

the imaginative exploration “is a way of creating our lives by expanding our consciousness, shaping our dispositions, satisfying our quest for meaning” (p. 3). The arts, therefore, are not only about sharing a vision but, through the creative expression, being reflexively shaped by that vision too.

Political Cartoons in Education

Political cartoons are representations of societal phenomena and are guided by social and ideological intent. They are a creative medium where cartoonists explore different themes and meanings that represent group interests alongside the cartoonist’s own interests. They are produced to “inform the public about contemporary or topical issues and to discuss contentious socio-political issues” (Felicia, 2021, p. 269). As multimodal texts, political cartoons combine visual and verbal modes of communication to present social or political critique (Wawra, 2018, p.77). As a corollary of having a limited amount of space in which to operate, - often a single panel - political cartoonists make use of various devices such as metaphor, humor, and satire. The successful political cartoonist is thus able to communicate sophisticated visual rhetoric in a limited space.

Political cartoons’ brevity and function as stand-alone texts has made them ripe for inclusion in classes of varied subject matter and learner age. They can be used as set induction pieces to begin a lesson, be the primary focus of a lesson, or be used as an evaluation tool (Kleeman, 2006). For visual learners, they can be particularly empowering because they accommodate their preferred learning style (van Wyk, 2011, p. 125). Political cartoons are effective at engaging students in discussions about contemporary political issues (Kleeman,

2006, p. 146) and can also be used to foster peer-to-peer conversation and collaboration (van Wyk, 2011, p. 123). They are texts students enjoy looking at and this leads students to be more motivated in the classroom (van Wyk, 2011, p. 122), and they can foster critical thinking skills (Dougherty, 2002, p. 264). Cartoons can also be used to show different ideological and political approaches to an issue (Hammett & Mather, 2011, p. 104) and for helping students formulate their own responses to contemporary societal challenges (Toldeo, Yangco, & Espinosa, 2014, p. 46).

Concurrent with these merits is an acknowledgment that simply showing a student a cartoon and expecting them to immediately grasp its intent is unreasonable. This is because the interplay between visual and verbal prompts, the use of metaphors, the requirement to understand the context, the required knowledge of the intertextual references, the required knowledge of relevant cultural symbols, and the ability to piece together the disparate components into a coherent whole all make parsing a cartoon difficult (El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010, p. 199-205). Educators therefore need to help students learn how to read cartoons and ensure that the cartoons' level of difficulty does not exceed the learners' abilities (Dougherty, 2002, p. 260).

Student-Produced Cartoons

The present study is focused on student-produced cartoons and studies have demonstrated that their inclusion offers students academic and social benefits. Research by John H. Bickford III has shown that cartoon-creation “elicits engagement, high levels of criticality, creative expressivity, and healthy analytical discussions” (Bickford, 2011, p. 57).

Producing cartoons has also been shown to increase students' motivation and, because students are more motivated, they also understand and recall content better (Rule and Auge, 2005, p. 556). Students are also more willing to depict less comfortable and more socially taboo topics in a visual format than in written or oral communication (Mutonyi and Kendrick, 2011). Writing about student-produced cartoons about AIDS in Uganda, Harriet Mutonyi and Maureen E. Kendrick (2011) observed: "cartoon representations served a unique dual role in that they allowed students to both maintain and transcend cultural barriers" (p. 245). This is because the students' work reflected the knowledge students have gleaned throughout their lifetimes about AIDS but also allowed for students to demonstrate their own thoughts and feelings about the syndrome.

Arts in Israel Education

The last decade has seen a proliferation in publications about Israel education in formal and experiential settings.ⁱ There have, however, been very few studies authored about the use of creative and visual arts in Israel education. A qualitative study by Matt Reingold (2021) examined how a group of high school students interpreted strips from Israeli cartoonist Shay Charka's series *Over the Line*. Charka's cartoons are heavily rooted in Israeli political and religious contexts, with Charka's autobiographical series frequently delving into the salience of both topics. In addition to replicating the above-mentioned educational outcomes like enjoyable learning and meaningful discussions, the study's results showed that Charka's transparent identity as a right-wing Orthodox Jew enabled students to better understand Israelis of his demographic, and that his cartoons humanized his community for the students.

There have been two studies that have examined student-produced creative products in Israel education. Ofra Backenroth and Alex Sinclair (2015) conducted a practitioner study on how preservice teachers used moviemaking as a tool for expressing their understanding of complex aspects in Israeli society while remaining emotionally connected to their pro-Israel identity. The authors concluded that moviemaking – and by extension the entire creative process – provides opportunity for “learners to really attack the issue . . . in a way that is very personally meaningful, and that . . . actually intensifies [the relationship with Israel]” (p. 79). The second example comes from a study Reingold (2020) authored about a group of high school seniors who produced artwork in response to poems, videos, and prose produced by Israelis. The students’ work demonstrated that they did not “see themselves as outsiders but as diasporic Zionists invested in building an Israel that they feel an even stronger connection toward” (p. 461). The two studies demonstrate that arts-based products provide students with opportunities for meaningful self-reflection in relation to Israel. They both, however, rely exclusively on student products to construe meaning and arrive at conclusions. This therefore means that student reflections on the process of learning through the arts is absent along with any opportunity for meaningful follow up on the students’ work. The present study begins to fill in this gap by examining students’ creative work but also spending time with the students themselves and hearing their reflections on their work and their experiences creating it. Doing so allows for a deeper understanding of the students themselves alongside being able to understand their creative and artistic process.

Method

Tarbut High is a large community Jewish High School in a major Canadian metropolitan city. The school's mission statement identifies the school as supportive of Israel and as seeking to inculcate positive identification between students and Israel. The school hires teachers from Israel to stimulate dialogue about Israel amongst students and to create meaningful Israel programming. As well, Grade 11 students are required to study the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for one semester, and many choose to enroll in a Grade 12 elective on contemporary Israeli Society.

Data Collection

During the 2022-2023 school year, the author taught a cohort of 22 students in a section of the contemporary Israeli Society course. In addition to a set curriculum that introduces students to Israel's politics and culture, students also study current events to understand what is happening in Israel in the present. Current events are taught by reading news articles and watching videos, and the author also presented students with political cartoons by illustrators that spanned Israel's political and religious spectra. Cartoons thus became a feature of classroom learning, with students frequently discussing and debating artists' intentions and their interpretations of different artistic works. At approximately the mid-point of the year, students were tasked with producing their own political cartoon based on the following instructions:

Produce one creative and thoughtful political cartoon that responds to at least one of the following questions:

- What does it mean to be Israeli? What should it be?

- What is Israeli identity? What should Israeli identity be?
- Who should be counted as belonging to Israeli society and who shouldn't?

Your political cartoon should be informed by at least one (but ideally more) of the texts and topics we have studied this year.

Your cartoon should include images/visuals and text that clearly express your answer to the question. Remember that in a political cartoon, everything is purposeful and intentional and is designed to make an impact on the reader! This means that you, too, should use signs and symbols (general and/or Israeli), people and metaphors in order to demonstrate your thinking about the texts.

You are also to compose a personal reflection statement of at least two double-spaced pages. This is your chance to share with me why you made what you made, what inspired you and how you arrived at your reading based on the texts, videos, and topics we have studied.

In addition to the students' cartoons and written statements which were collected, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 students after the cartoons were graded and returned.ⁱⁱ The primary purpose of the interview questions was to understand whether new understandings of Israel emerged because of creating a cartoon about Israeli society. To that end, direct questions about what students produced and whether they formed new associations with the country were asked. As an arts-based assessment, questions were also asked to try to ascertain student familiarity and comfort with producing creative works, whether the assignment proved to be difficult and what strategies were used to overcome any difficulties. Lastly, students were asked whether the assignment should be used in future years.

Data Analysis

The data was considered using what Robert S. Weiss (1995) called issue-focused analysis. This is an approach that emphasizes the importance of the issue at hand as opposed to the individual interviewees. Doing so places the students' perspectives in dialogue with each other to generate a more comprehensive understanding of student-produced political cartoons in Israel education. While individual interviewee profiles are not generated, issue-focused analysis still does use individual perspectives to serve as examples that are demonstrative of broader trends in the data that was collected and analyzed.

Data was coded and analyzed using grounded theory methodology with the goal of arriving at new theories that demonstrate the merits of using arts-based assessments in Israel education. As a research method, grounded theory is an "approach to qualitative data collection and analysis, ultimately generating a theoretical explanation for the phenomenon being studied" (Olshansky, 2014, p. 1). The interviews were transcribed and then, along with the students' written submissions, were coded using open coding to identify "distinct units of meaning" (Goulding, 2002, p. 74). I then used focused coding to generate descriptive categories and higher order categories (Liska Belgrave & Seide, 2019) that explain the educational merits of introducing arts-based assessments in Israel education.

Findings

Four primary findings emerged from the different sets of data. First, producing a cartoon facilitated new thinking about Israel. Second, frequent exposure to cartoons in class made

producing a cartoon easier. Third, the opportunity to express ideas verbally and in writing helped students become more confident in expressing their creativity. Fourth, despite finding the assignment challenging, students saw tremendous value in its inclusion in the course.

Cartooning facilitated new lines of thinking about Israel

Thinking Metaphorically

Much like the cartoons that students viewed in class throughout the year, students' creative products revealed that they also thought metaphorically in order to convey how they understood Israeli society. Zane,ⁱⁱⁱ a student who aspires to play professional baseball, used the sport as the basis for his exploration of how *Mizrahim*, Judeo-Arabs, struggled to integrate and adjust to Israeli society. In his cartoon, a player named Mizrahi has just been called up to bat. Even before the first pitch has been thrown, the umpire – illustrated to look like Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu – has called the player out. Zane's visual metaphor uses sport as the medium for conveying his commentary on the unjustness of *Mizrahi* mistreatment in Israeli society. Here, Netanyahu's inclusion metonymically symbolizes the Israeli government, with the prime minister serving as the most recognizable Israeli leader that Zane knows.

A second example where visual metaphors were used to convey understanding of Israeli society was offered by Marley. In her digitally-produced cartoon, Marley illustrated two cookie cutters in the shapes of ultra-Orthodox men replete with ritual fringes and top hats. The cookie cutters are made of metal and are not malleable. Nestled inside each of the cookie cutters is an individual, a Black Ethiopian Israeli inside one and a *Mizrahi* man inside the other. Neither figure comfortably occupies the space afforded by the cookie cutter, with the woman having to

bend her knees to fit into the shape and the man needing to awkwardly position his arms.

Unsurprisingly, both are illustrated with unhappy facial expressions (Figure 1). In her written statement, she explained: “I seek to depict pressures to conform by showing how society at large imposes the values and cultural practices of mainstream Ashkenazi Judaism on all Israelis, regardless of their traditions. Instead of feeling welcomed, people from these communities feel like they do not belong because they don’t conform to the flavour of Judaism that permeates conventional Israeli identity”. Unlike Zane’s visual metaphor which draws upon his interest in baseball, Marley’s is drawn from her imagination and the ways that she has come to think of Israeli society as a space designed for Orthodox men wherein everyone else must contort themselves in order to fit in, even if it leaves them uncomfortable and unable to be their true selves.



Figure 1. Cookie cutter cartoon by Marley.

Making personal connections to Israel

Students frequently made personal connections between their own interests and Israeli society and subsequently illustrated those interests into their commentaries on Israeli society. Students in this category were inspired by values they cared deeply about and brought them to bear on how they understood Israel. Much like Marley whose illustration depicted Ethiopians struggling to fit into Israeli hegemonies, Jessica was also troubled by racism and exclusion in Israeli society. Dissimilarly, however, was that Jessica was explicitly inspired by her own experiences combatting discrimination in Canadian society. Jessica chose to illustrate groups of people trying to enter Israel through two passport control gates. One of the security gates is labelled “Jew” and individuals of many different colors seamlessly passing through. A second gate is labelled “Non-Jew” and here, four individuals shaded fully in black are prevented from passing through the gate (Figure 2). In her interview, Jessica explained that the impetus for her cartoon was a video that was screened in class featuring Ethiopian Jews reflecting on how they felt rejected by other Jewish Israelis because of their different Jewish practices (Vice News, 2020). She said that the Ethiopian experience was the one she “felt most passionate about because [she’s] cared about racism [her] whole life”. Learning that racism existed in Israel didn’t lead Jessica to reject Israel, but it did make her “wish that people could see things differently and that [she] could create change somehow”.

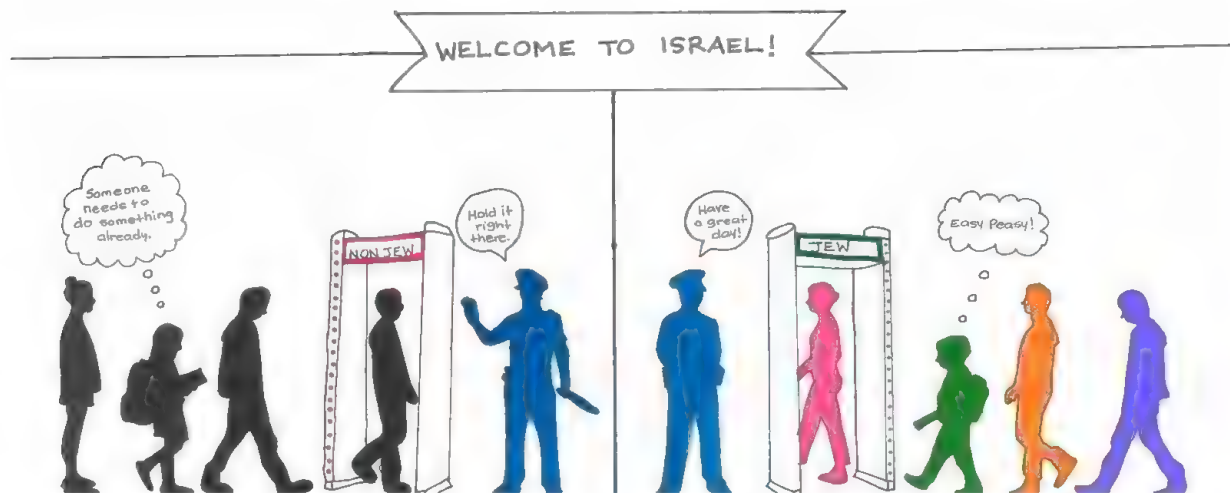


Figure 2. Border control for Jews and non-Jews by Jessica.

A significantly more personal cartoon was produced by Megan. For her cartoon, Megan drew upon her own experiences of feeling excluded from the Jewish community because her father is a convert and because of her light blond hair and bright blue eyes. In her digital image, Megan illustrated three different figures, one a Black Ethiopian male, one an ultra-Orthodox Jewish male, and one a blond-haired female, with the word "Jew" atop each (Figure 3). When I asked her whether the third figure was self-referential, Megan replied in the affirmative:

The last person was supposed to represent someone like me, someone who's a diaspora Jew and not necessarily the typical look of a Jew and not necessarily someone you think of when you think of a Jew. I'm... well, at least my family isn't very religious and we don't practice Judaism as much as other people do. I feel... I don't know, I don't have the look of a Jew. I wrote Jew on top of all the people just to show that no matter what they look like, no matter where they come from, the color the skin, the language they speak, how they celebrate Judaism, they're all Jewish. They're all a part of one religion. I'm not

from Israel, I only visited Israel once, and I practice Judaism in a different way than most people, but I'm still a Jew, and I still want to be recognized as one.

For both Megan and Jessica, cartooning afforded them the opportunity to bring themselves and their own experiences into their learning about Israel which made their studies meaningful and relevant.

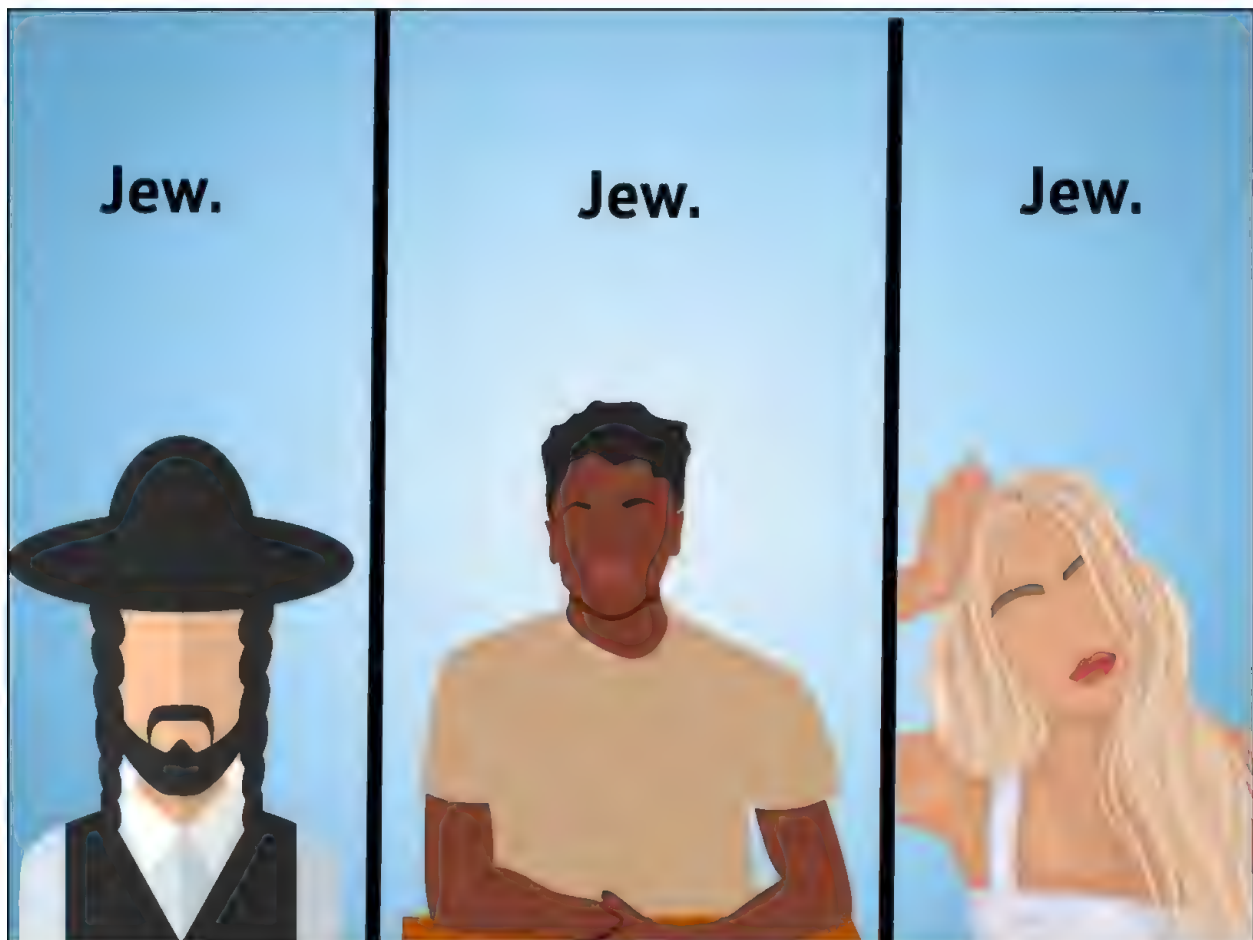


Figure 3. Three different Jews by Megan.

Envisioning a different Israel

Both Megan's and Jessica's cartoons about their disappointment and frustration with marginalization towards religious and ethnic communities expressed a desire for the current

situation to be changed in the future. Counted amongst the cartoons submitted were also examples that went one step further than just hopes by actually envisioning what a future Israel would look like if discrimination was excised. Dylan's cartoon contains three components. In the bottom corner is a female cartoon character who is standing with her hands clasped together. A thought bubble is illustrated emerging from the character and it contains a collection of photographs of different types of Jews – religious, secular, Ashkenazi, Ethiopian, and *Mizrahi*. Beneath the thought bubble is Theodor Herzl's famous phrase: "if you will it, it is no dream". By invoking Herzl's statement, Dylan reappropriates it by shifting it from its original reference to the founding of the state of Israel to the founding of a state that is inclusive of all of its Jewish citizens. When she was asked for the inspiration behind her cartoon, Dylan reflected on the integration challenges faced by *Mizrahim* and Ethiopians, alongside a desire "to show [her] ideal Israel". Dylan's work is demonstrative of how the arts enabled a problem-solving approach to contemporary Israeli problems.

Learning through the Arts Facilitated Being Assessed Through the Arts

Amongst the learners interviewed, there were certainly students who were excited about the prospect of a creative assignment but there was also a cohort of 7 learners whose interviews revealed that they were apprehensive about the assignment when it was distributed. Despite their reservations, the students in this group concluded that creating a cartoon was a positive learning experience. The common factor that all seven shared was that learning through the arts by way of frequent lessons featuring cartoons enabled them to feel more confident in producing a cartoon of their own.

The students who were nervous shared that they felt that they were neither creative enough nor artistically competent enough to produce a cartoon of their own. Dylan put it most succinctly: “Nervous. I’m not so good with the creative things”. Kate explained: “I was not excited about it because I’m not creative and I don’t like thinking of things like that and doing artwork”. Despite their fears, these students found the experience to be not as bad as they had anticipated and, for some, it was even enjoyable. For example, Dylan shared that getting to “match a picture with my thoughts was a cool way to show your own opinion instead of just writing a paper” and that “there’s a value in doing creative things”. Despite his original concerns of not being able to express himself visually, Benji concluded that he “thought it was fun” to make a cartoon.

A common thread that ran through the responses of the seven students who were wary of the assignment was the value they found in seeing the work of other cartoonists. As Robbie remarked: “I think I wouldn’t’ve been able to do the assignment without having looked at and talked about examples in class” Across the interviews, students made explicit links between the formative learning and the summative assessment, with the exposure to cartoons serving as a valuable preparatory tool for their own creative expression. The value was, however, felt in different ways by different learners. For instance, Blair appreciated seeing and discussing the layers of detail and symbolism that cartoonists embed in their works because this helped her do likewise in her own cartoon. Conversely, Matan noted that the classroom learning helped him better understand the conventions of political cartoons, including how to use text sparingly in order to enhance a cartoon’s impact.

Counted amongst the interviewees were also students who were very excited to be able to make a cartoon. Both Penny and Megan yoked their interest in creative expression to the difficulties they experience on more traditional summative assessments like tests and essays. Megan explained that the assignment was “a good chance to show my creativity and demonstrate what I’ve learned in the course,” while Penny said that she was “excited for it because I am not as good at tests so I like creative projects where I can actually express what I know”. Others shared that they were excited at the opportunity to try to replicate the types of cartoons that they have been looking at in class. In response to what his reaction was to being assigned the project, Zane explained: “I was excited because it’s been like three or four times where we’ve been looking at other cartoons. Every time I thought about how the cartoonists were able to come up with such creative ideas. And when I realized that I can do the same thing, it was exciting because I wanted to make something really creative”.

Concretizing Ideas Helps Unlock Creativity

Approximately one week before the students’ political cartoons were due, they were given class time for conferencing with their teacher. This time was allocated to provide students the opportunity to discuss their ideas, ask questions, clarify expectations, and receive support. For some students, especially amongst students who were nervous about having to make their own cartoon, conferencing was an essential part of the process because it helped them sift through their ideas and generate a more actionable plan. Blair shared: “I was very lost with my ideas. They were separate ideas and conferencing helped solidify my plan rather than just sitting there with my thoughts, trying a million different things”. Similarly, Dylan explained “I had the idea of

what I wanted to make in my head, but I didn't really know how to convey that in a picture". The opportunity to talk through their ideas was crucial to helping Blair and Dylan be able to put their ideas on to paper and actually create something.

Conferencing also proved useful even for students who were excited about the prospect of making a cartoon and who had a plan in mind. For these students, the opportunity to discuss their ideas with their teacher and their peers provided them with new lines of inquiry and additional ways to express their ideas. Both Jessica and Hunter discussed their ideas with their teacher but they also discussed their ideas with each other. In their respective interviews, they each referred to the other's help in enhancing their final product. As a student who is deeply concerned with social justice issues in the world, Jessica wanted her cartoon to reflect her new awareness that racism exists in Israeli society towards members of the country's Ethiopian population. Discussing her ideas with Hunter validated her plan and offered her "reassurance to know that it was a topic worth doing". Conversely, Hunter appreciated the perspectives offered by his teacher, Jessica, and even his parents because when you are "thinking about something yourself, you're always going to miss something ... when you think of something in your head, you usually think it's going to be all good but you need a second or third opinion to make it even better".

The benefits of concretizing their thinking in the conferences was also evident in the students' responses to whether it was necessary to submit a written statement alongside their cartoon. No interviewee complained about having to write an accompanying text or suggested that it was unnecessary. Instead, the students spoke positively about having to put their ideas down on paper because it afforded them the opportunity to try to ensure their teacher would

be able to understand their cartoon. At its most basic, writing down ideas helped mitigate concerns that their artwork would not be understood. Echoing her previously mentioned concerns of being able to successfully convey her ideas creatively, Dylan stated: "Sometimes you can't always get the message across in a picture. Personally, I wasn't confident in my artistic abilities, so it gave me an opportunity to explain my train of thought and why I did what I did". But for others, writing ideas down allowed for them to show their teacher that they tried to replicate the complex layering that they saw in professional cartoons but were not sure if their teacher would be able to identify all the subtle artistic choices that were made. Hunter explained: "I think when you have the artist write something, you can see all the points they're trying to make and the thought process behind it. I don't think you can do this assignment without it". Zane, who tied his cartoon in with his love of baseball, shared: "there's a part that you need to interpret, and sometimes it can just go right over your head and it could be a really important part in the cartoon that I hid a little bit. And if I didn't write out my ideas, it could have been ignored".

Students also shared that the act of writing necessitated that they be purposeful in their creativity. Kate, a student who often wanted to score high grades while using as minimal effort as possible, felt that the written statement held her accountable to her own work and ensured that she did not just assemble a collection of disparate and disconnected images and call it a cartoon. She said: "You can make anything you want but you have to be able to explain it and you can't just put something on a piece of paper." Jessica felt that having to write her ideas down forced her to be more thoughtful and purposeful in what she chose to include in her work. She relayed: "Writing the statement taught me about what I was doing and the

importance of symbolism and how it related to the topic". The students' perspectives on the pre-assessment strategy of conferencing and also the requirement to compose a written statement revealed that these assignment components were imperative to the students' ability to successfully complete their political cartoons.

Arts-Based Assessments were Valuable to Learners

Students were quick to identify that the assignment was not simple or easy to complete. It was, in fact, difficult for some. For Fiona, having to share her opinion about a topic through a creative medium was particularly challenging. Others, like Marley, felt wary of commenting on a topic that does not personally affect her. Most common, however, were variations of what Hunter explained: "the hardest parts were actually finding an idea and then making it happen". Despite these concerns, students consistently affirmed the value of the assessment as an integral part of classroom learning and one that should be assigned again in subsequent years.

While some students' explanations tied making a cartoon back to the classroom experience of seeing professional cartoons, others like Blair and Megan spoke of the value of being able to be assessed through the arts. This is because the arts afforded them the chance to demonstrate their knowledge in a way that allowed them to make use of the class curriculum alongside their own lived experiences. For Megan in particular, the opportunity to create a cartoon was a powerful experience. As noted above, she drew upon her experiences of being rejected for not looking Jewish and illustrated three different figures, including herself, with the word "Jew" atop each. She explained: "Making a cartoon allows students to use their creativity and use personal experiences to actually make their assignment more meaningful, rather than

just writing an essay that you don't really care about, or that you aren't interested in doing. This is something that people...well, at least me, I actually cared about." What Megan is offering here is a powerful statement about the value of arts-based learning as a tool that enabled her to have a personally meaningful experience in Israel education.

A secondary benefit of being assessed through the arts was that it allowed students who prefer creative assignments to demonstrate their competency because the assessment played to their strengths. Jessica identified the benefit thusly: "it gives kids who have a hard time writing and expressing themselves through words a chance to have their moment and be able to use their artistic and creative abilities to create something that's really powerful. And I think that makes this a very valuable project".

Discussion

The data paints a robust portrait of a community of learners who – despite some apprehension – came to see great value in making their own political cartoon. Producing a political cartoon did not, however, come naturally. The students' responses clearly indicate that the time spent studying cartoons in class played a significant role in shaping how students approached their own cartoon. Furthermore, allocating time to discuss ideas was also not ancillary to their perceived successes. When considered together, the students' responses to the questions about in-class learning and in-class conferencing show the value of teachers' investing time in pre-assessment strategies. For students unfamiliar with the visual aesthetics of political cartoons or uncertain about how to transform their ideas into something tangible, seeing examples of others' work and talking through the creative process was seminal to the

experience. Equally important to the learners – even though it added more work – was the opportunity to present their ideas in a composed statement. Drawing upon their own experiences in class with unpacking some of the hidden layers of cartoons, students felt it important that they do the same with their own work, sharing with their teacher their intentions and thought processes.

What emerged most clearly from the students work and interviews was how the political cartoons played an important role in affording them the opportunity to think deeply and meaningfully about contemporary Israeli society and their own relationship with the state. Cartoons like Megan's and Dylan's were certainly personal and rooted in their own experiences but the personal experiences were intertwined with their understandings of the complexities in Israeli society. As both indicated, the latitude to think creatively afforded them the opportunity to engage with issues that matter to them and to express their ideas in a way that could not have been accomplished in prose.

Megan's cartoon is an expression of response to her own discrimination and her inclusion of herself in the cartoon links together her experiences alongside those faced by contemporary Israelis. In their analysis of Ugandan students' AIDS cartoons, Mutonyi and Kendrick determined that cartooning facilitated the opportunity to express ideas about taboo topics. Similarly, Megan was able to share her ideas visually and even allowed her classmates to see her work during a lesson where the cartoons were shared, but she chose to temper her work by explaining that her presence in the strip was there to just show an additional example of who can be considered a Jew. The opportunities afforded by the arts-based assignment

therefore allowed for Megan to mine her own anxieties and doubts and to reveal them in a safe-enough space with her teacher and also with herself.

Dylan was both the most reticent to having to complete a creative assignment but also the lone student to articulate a fully-formed vision for Israel's future. Her work reflects Greene's (2001) contention that the arts help students become partners in fashioning a world that is better than the incomplete one that currently exists. In her cartoon, Dylan transcends commenting on a problem and instead creatively thinks about solutions to them. In this sense, Dylan's cartoon demonstrates a dual layer of creativity: there is the creativity of producing a cartoon but also the creativity needed to envision alternative realities to the ones that currently exist. As Dylan herself acknowledged, thinking creatively is a type of thinking that is foreign to her but being required to do so freed her to think in new directions and to see Israel in an alternative light.

Learners like Zane and Marley who did not draw upon lived experiences were also able to demonstrate sophisticated thinking about Israeli society in their respective baseball and cookie cutter cartoons. This was accomplished through thinking metaphorically. Metaphor is not just the linkage of two disparate items through comparison. Instead, it is a mode of communication that draws upon a deep understanding of a topic and an ability to abstract it to its core or essential components. When we make metaphor, we open ourselves up to others to show how we think, relate, and understand a topic because the metaphor itself is personal. The use of metaphor in political cartoons allows for complex ideas to be communicated in a limited amount of space through the affective domain of the visual. In some cases, like Zane's, words were used to help convey meaning, but in Marley's case, the cartoon relied solely on the

reader's ability to conjoin the disparate visual signifiers into a cohesive statement. As a mode of communication that operates in the realms of the affective and the emotional, Marley and Zane are, just like Jessica and Megan also drawing upon their personal feelings towards Israeli society, albeit in a wholly different way through their use of visual metaphors.

Conclusion

The students whose voices and artwork have shaped this study are unique; they brought their own experiences to bear on how they understand, think, and relate to Israel. But they are also not unique because all students, like all people, are able to demonstrate creative inquiry when positioned for success. The outcomes that have been demonstrated here are eminently replicable but it is imperative to bear in mind that they were not produced just because students were asked to make a cartoon. Instead, pre-planning and prose requirements played important roles in facilitating a meaningful and educational experience. To that end, educators must be purposeful and thoughtful about how the arts are used in their classrooms. Like any other subject, teaching in and through the arts requires an understanding of the medium and the pedagogical content knowledge of how to do it effectively (Shulman, 1986). As well, research in arts-based learning has demonstrated that it is most effective when it is a regular part of the classroom routine and so it cannot be just a one-off experience (Upitis, 2011). While the cartoon that was studied for this paper was the lone creative assessment in the course, arts-based learning was a regular part of the class dynamic, such that the learners saw it as an essential component to their own creative successes.

The results here show that cartooning is serious work. When done effectively, it engages with the hearts and minds of the learners. The minimal use of words in cartoons does not negate the sophisticated emotions and thoughts that are brought to bear on a subject. In as politically charged an environment as an Israel education classroom can be, sometimes the words are hard to come by. The opportunity to think metaphorically, creatively, and personally allows students to embrace these other forms of communication which are certainly no less important and, in some cases, even more important. For where words fail, a purposefully powerful image can resonate all the more so.

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ⁱⁱ I opted to wait to interview students until after assignments were returned to try to mitigate against students framing their responses in order to try to curry favour for positive grades.

ⁱⁱⁱ All student names are pseudonyms.

January 2024

Reflections of “Use of Comics in Social Studies Education” Course: The Opinion and Experiences of Teachers

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Recommended Citation

İlhan, Genç Osman and Şin, Maide (2024) "Reflections of “Use of Comics in Social Studies Education” Course: The Opinion and Experiences of Teachers," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 8, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss8/2>

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Reflections of “Use of Comics in Social Studies Education” Course: The Opinion and Experiences of Teachers

Cover Page Footnote

Dear Editor, This study is the examination of the use of comics in education course, which was opened by me for the first time in Turkey, according to the opinions of teachers. Sincerely yours

Introduction

This social transformation has increased human interaction and transformed the world into a global village, in the words of Marshall McLuhan (Celik Varol & Varol, 2019). This interaction has affected all aspects of society, including the education sector. It is expected that the teacher, who is one of the most important members of the education community, will be a part of this change and possess numerous advanced abilities. A qualified teacher is defined as the one accessing information, using information at the right time and place, critical thinking, being solution-oriented, interpreting information, mastering the use of Web 2.0 tools, following and applying new developments in education, producing age and need appropriate materials, having knowledge of the field and field developments, and serving as a role model for students (Tutkun & Aksoyalp, 2010; Blau, Pesed & Nusan, 2014; Gudmundsdottir & Hatlevik, 2018; Utkugün, 2021). Teachers should be equipped with age-appropriate and contemporary tools (materials) while performing their profession (Meydan, 2018; McGarr & McDonagh, 2021). An important objective of the teacher education is that each teacher will develop and use materials appropriate for his or her own field, as well as designing engaging, unique, and high-quality materials. The tools (materials) that have grown in importance and number in the educational environment can be selected from those already available or created by the teachers themselves. One of the characteristics that make teachers valuable is their ability to create materials and develop original products suited to their own course-subject goals. A material that is effective makes teaching permanent, makes learning enjoyable, and boosts motivation. In this way, students contribute positively to permanent learning and academic success by reconstructing the knowledge that they have acquired. However, a qualified teacher education allows for the creation and application of original, needs-based materials (Demiralp, 2007).

The materials may pertain to a single branch or to multiple fields. One of these materials is the long-standing use of comic books in education. Comics are an original and one-of-a-kind art form that emerged from the combination of visual art and fiction writing (Eisner 1985). In addition, McCloud (1993) defined comics as a sequential art whose purpose is to convey a message to the reader. McCloud (2000) asserts that comic books facilitate the transfer of events in the real world from a unique perspective, indicating that it encourages original and creative thinking. Comics can be published and used as educational materials, or they can be designed and produced manually or digitally based on the subject, achievement, and requirements. In addition, unlike traditional materials, comics are deemed suitable for use by students and teachers as an innovative teaching tool (Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010). Comic books are an effective tool for teaching difficult, abstract, and complex subjects. Social studies is one of the most prevalent areas

where difficult-to-teach subjects are numerous due to the fact that social studies integrates numerous social and human sciences and aims to develop citizenship skills (NCSS). While Edgar B. Wesley defines this field as a simplified form that combines pedagogy and social sciences (Hertzberg, 1981, p.12), Oztürk (2006) asserts that it raises active citizens who can apply their knowledge and solve problems in tandem with the change and development of the age, identifies it as a training programme for individuals. According to Doğanay (2004), he has a significant role in the socialisation and socialisation of the individual. With these brief definitions, one can conclude that social studies has a crucial role in the formation of the individual and that its intense and diverse structure makes it difficult to teach. Teachers in this field should also be open to innovation, capable of self-improvement, technologically savvy, and able to utilise and create diverse materials. At this point, the study's objective becomes apparent. The study was conducted to reveal the reflections of social studies teachers who took the master's-level course titled "The Use of Comics in Social Studies Education." In the method section, detailed information about this course will be provided. What are the opinions and reflections of 2019-2022 social studies teachers who took a postgraduate course on the design and implementation of comics as educational material in the classroom? We looked for solutions to the problem. The significance of this study lies in the teachers' evaluation of this unique course, which was introduced for the first time in Turkey and continues to run.

Methodology

Research Design

The research employed phenomenological methodology, one of the qualitative study designs. Phenomenology, which provides the opportunity to examine the perspectives of individuals in relation to events and phenomena, is an effective method for revealing the individual's views and thoughts objectively. (Lune&Berg 2017; Creswell, 2018, p. 77). Phenomenological "seek to discover naturally occurring population meanings among study populations' members" (Lune & Berg 2017, p. 3). This study aims to comprehend the phenomenon of comics use in education among graduate students at Yildiz Technical University.

Participants

Participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling. In qualitative research, purposeful sampling is a common sampling technique that yields a more accurate answer to the research question (Patton, 2002). In contrast, criterion sampling involves selecting participants based on a particular criterion or characteristic (Patton, 2002, p. 238). This study's participants were selected based

on their participation in the "Use of Comics in Social Studies Education" elective course offered as part of the Social Studies Education Master's programme and teaching at Yildiz Technical University. It is sufficient for teachers to be included in the study group if they have taken the course beginning with the fall semester of 2019, when it goes into effect, or any semester thereafter. The research study group consisted of 12 social studies teachers who met the above criteria. 5 of the participants were employed by private schools, while 7 were employed by public schools. There were 9 female teachers and 3 male teachers, and each had at least two years of professional experience.

Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured interview form was used to collect data for the study. Semi-structured interviews consist of formerly prepared open-ended questions, which enables the researcher to ask detailed questions and facilitate the event for a more thorough analysis of the situation or event. In brief responses, the researcher can pose questions and obtain participant information (Mathers et al., 1998). In addition, it allows the participants to express their emotions clearly while responding to the questions, allowing the ideas to be objectively revealed (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 68). The study's semi-structured interview form development process began with the acquisition of the necessary information through a review of the relevant literature. Then, in accordance with the research's objective, a pool of questions and draught forms were developed. At the draught stage, two academicians, a comic book artist, and three social studies teachers were consulted in order to create the final form. Then, a pilot study was conducted with two teachers of social studies who met the criteria for the study group. Following these steps, the form was reduced to 14 questions.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was used in the analysis of the data in the research. Content analysis allows for more in-depth research. Content analysis makes the study more clear and understandable by classifying it within the framework of themes and concepts (Lune & Berg, 2017, 181; Kvale, 2007, 105). In this way of analysis, importance is given to the relation between theme and concept in terms of presenting the research results clearly. At the end of the interviews, the transcript of the interview records was the first step followed. The interviews, which were transcribed into text, were analyzed using the content analysis method. As a result of the analyzes, the data obtained through content analysis were interpreted in accordance with the tables created. In order to express the findings more clearly and clearly, codes were created in parallel with the tables prepared (Lune & Berg,

2017, 181-184; Kvale, 2007, 105, 106). The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The data obtained were analyzed with themes and coding, and the results were presented by discussing in the context of the research question.

Emergence of the Study and Structure of Course

During her graduate studies at Yildiz Technical University in Turkey, one of the researchers decided to enrol in a different course, "Use of Comics in Social Studies Education", for teacher training and teacher education, which led to the conception of the study. Using comics in education seemed different and it captured the close attention of the researcher. At the conclusion of the course, she decided to transform the benefit that had emerged by bringing an important art to educational environments, bringing a different perspective to education, developing digital skills, developing the power of writing and storytelling, and transforming it into a product by the end of the semester. The reason was numerous positive effects of the course on her professional life. She brought the topic to her advisor, the instructor of the course, and they started to cooperate. They began this research to share the experiences of other teachers taking the course and to inform the appropriate parties of its existence.

Dr. Genc Osman Ilhan designed the "Use of Comics in Social Studies Education" course, and taught it for the first time during the 2019-2020 academic year's fall semester. During the development of the course's concept, the instructor was inspired from his doctoral dissertation research on the use of comics in social studies education. This was the first course in Turkey to design comics as a resource for education in general and social studies education specifically. Each student would have their own educational comics by the end of the course. Students were able to create these comics by either drawing them by hand or creating them digitally. This way, the course participants' manual and digital skills were expected to developed according to their own desires. The course differs from most others in that both theory and practise were presented. Participating actively in the process affords students the opportunity to both learn and create. The instructor wants those who enrol in the course to create educational comic book content, either digitally or manually, and share it with their classmates at the end of the semester. Thus, the product of each individual who completes the course emerges, i.e., their own comic book material that they created. During the presentations, the discussions and exchange of ideas generate a great deal of wealth and various perspectives emerge. Additionally, it is ensured that people learn a new art form and incorporate it into their education, with rubrics and inquiry-based learning (Degand, 2022). In light of this integration, it can be said that they have developed a distinct perspective and a dominant position in both education and their respective fields. At the end of the semester, it was observed that the course was instructive, active, and product-based,

as well as entertaining and enjoyable. In addition, the coordinator did not administer exams when grading the students' work; rather, he evaluated the process and the comics presented.

Table 1. Weekly Progress in Comics in Education Course

The Use of Comics in Social Studies Education	
Week 1	In the first week, the syllabus prepared by the director was distributed to the students. The rules of the course, the topics, issues, resources were given based on the exchange of views with the students. In the same week, subjects such as why the students chose the course and their expectations from the course were taken both in writing and verbally. A brief introduction to the lesson was made and some topics were mentioned: <i>What is a comic book? Preliminary information about the comics was given, and different sources, especially many comics, were brought to the class and shared with the students.</i> The coordinator asked each student to read 2 comics for the next week and to send them by interpreting them according to the criteria presented on an online platform 2 days before the lesson.
Week 2	The second week started with the discussion of the comics, which the students read as the first week's work and examined according to the criteria determined by the coordinator. With both educational and artistic studies, the level of consciousness of those who were not familiar with comics was increased. Thus, a large pool of comics and awareness were being created. The coordinator gave academic reading texts related to the lesson to be taught next week and determined a return date via the online system. Also, the coordinator opened Pixton classroom and shared the code with the students. Students were expected to design their avatars for the next week.
Week 3	While giving theoretical information on the development and history of comics in the Executive World and Turkey, the articles on the subject he gave the previous week were discussed. He gave both domestic and foreign videos about comics for the other week and asked for a response from students.
Week 4	The acceptance of the art of comics in the world and the art of comics were discussed. In addition to this, the aesthetic power of comics was also mentioned. From this point of view, the way of comic book became a way of art was evaluated.

	Video and article review work was given for the next week and a return was requested.
Week 5	Comics in education and history of comics was introduced. Readings were given for the next week.
Week 6	In education, both domestic and foreign academic studies related to comics were examined and discussions were made. Task for video watching and interpretation was given for the next week.
Week 7	The components of the art of comics were discussed from a technical point of view. Topics such as what kind of details it had, the use of squares and balloons were taught. The lesson was concluded by mentioning the scenario part. For the lesson to be held next week, the coordinator asked the students for scenario ideas, and they were told to give a brief justification and to return online by explaining.
Week 8	The students explained the scenarios they thought one by one, and the instructor and the class discussed them together. A suitable environment was created for the emergence of new ideas and new scenarios. Students were asked to work on the scenario for one more week and focus on its educational aspect.
Week 9	In order to make the comic book scenarios prepared in the first part of the lesson suitable, the evaluations and discussions by the course participants and the coordinator continued this week. In the second part of the course, the Pixton Web 2.0 tool was introduced, how to use it, and drawing techniques were shown. The aim here was that no matter how good the scenario is, it can be realistic to the extent that it can be drawn. Because although Pixton is the best comic book authoring tool in the world, it is limited to hand drawing. In order for the students to see this and shape their scenarios accordingly, the coordinator asked each student to include them in the Pixton class and work. The process was more flexible for those who want to draw by hand. But they are very few in number. The coordinator asked them to explore and familiarize themselves with the related Web 2.0 tool for the next week, and stated that drawing lessons would continue.
Week 10	The students, who examined the Web 2.0 tool and saw its limitations, decided to update their scenarios. At the same time, they received support from the lecturer about the details of the tool. The lesson on how to use Pixton tool too long. It was requested by the coordinator to reach a certain frame of the

	comic in the digital environment by next week.
Week 11	Before the presentations, the students continued to work by sharing their difficulties, troubles and successes with the coordinator. In addition, the comics previously produced from Pixton were shown to the students and their details were explained.
Week 12	Presentations for the upcoming two two weeks started. Each student or groups of two, if any, made their presentations in the class in turn and introduced their comics. The instructor and classmates expressed their opinions and evaluations, and the instructor asked for updates where necessary.
Week 13	Presentations continued, and the comics produced were discussed as in the previous week.
Week 14	In the last lesson of the term, a general evaluation of the 14 weeks was made. Produced comics were evaluated for the last time. Both verbal and written feedback were received from the students. The term ended.

Findings and Discussion

In this part of the study, a comprehensive analysis of the "Use of Comics in Social Studies Education" course, the contributions of the teachers who took the course to their professional lives, the findings about the course process, and the content and results of other studies in the field are included.

Participants reported that they were unaware of this course prior to experiencing the course process. Especially the teachers who took the course for the first time in the Fall of 2019, when it was offered for the first time (the majority of participants), had no prior experience with comics in education. The participants outlined that they took the course for reasons such as completing credits, getting to know the instructor, or having faith in him. However, upon beginning the process, they realised the course was different than others. There were numerous causes for this distinction. The majority of the participants were introduced to the art of comics for the first time, were impressed, and recognised its educational value. In addition, they saw the platforms where this art can be created in the digital environment and are exposed to Web 2.0 applications. In this regard, they viewed the course as a time appropriate process in which digital skills are developed. In addition, the fact that students would publish their own educational comic book material at the end of the semester was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the course. One participant remarked that "the course was different than the theoretical lessons we

typically have” (P1M) and drew attention to the fact that the content of this lesson differed from that of other lessons in that it is based on practise and product.

As a result of the interviews, the codes derived about the expectations from the lesson are as follows: *those who expect it to be a theoretical course, those who expect it to be a fun course, those who expect a lesson on getting to know the comics, and those who cannot expect a course and choose the course to complete credits and are neutral toward the course*. Prior to the lesson, participants' anticipations for the lesson varied. Almost all of the teachers participating in this study had no prior experience on comics in education, partly because the course was first offered then. Both the course instructor and the group of students had an experience of a first. When asked about their expectations before the lesson, P9F responded, *"I didn't have any expectations because I had no prior knowledge or understanding of the subject"*. Then, another participant's perspective was P5F who stated, *"Before I took the comics class, I only saw it as a genre where stories could be entertaining and suitable for children"*. Due to the nature of the comic, P11F stated her *"expectation that the lesson will be entertaining rather than boring"*. As there were participants who expected the course to be entertaining due to comics, there were the ones who took the course because they knew the instructor before. In addition, it was clear a theoretical process was expected (P5F *"I initially anticipated a highly theoretical course"*).

The following codes were generated in the analysis of participant opinions after the lesson were: *the notion that it is a practical course, the history of comics, the fact that it is a fun technique, the acquisition of digital skills, the creation of educational materials, the publication of scholarly works, and the acquaintance with comic book artists*. The participant social studies teachers stated that the process exceeded their initial expectations. For instance, P2M stated *"I can confidently say that it exceeded my expectations. In other words, we created articles and cartoons"* and continued *"This course has taught me all the techniques in the design process and all the tools we can prepare, namely web 2 tools, and I can say that it has exceeded my expectations because it also gave me the chance to use it"*. The participant stated that the comics course gave him the opportunity to design comics, write scripts, and learn and apply web technologies related to the subject, a similar result is seen in studies in which technology-based courses are advised to be not merely theoretical (Çelik, 2020; Öksüz et al. 2009). P4M outlined *"Upon learning that we would be designing comics using the Pixton application, I was so pleased and enthusiastic that I meticulously prepared my comic book material. Consequently, I am able to state that the first lesson exceeded my expectations"*. He revealed that the course exceeded his expectations and that designing his own material using web applications in the field motivates course participants. The course was seen favorable as it contrasted the expectation of a classical, theoretical understanding with an application-focused process.

The perspectives of the participants on comics reading and comics are also addressed. Before the lesson, the participants' perspectives on the comics were solicited, and their responses were analysed. The majority of participants had incorrect or insufficient knowledge of the art of comics, with the exception of three individuals who had knowledge of comics prior to the lesson. In light of the data, the participants who were familiar with comics and had a reading habit prior to the lesson were assigned the following codes: "humour and comedy, fantasy, science fiction, adventure". P1M, who was introduced to comic books as a child, says, *"I learned to read and write from the first books I read prior to enrolling in this course"*. The first comics I read were simple books with lots of pictures and little text, and I enjoyed them. I appreciated how his sense of humour made me laugh and think. Another participant, P4F, stated, *"I've always been interested in DC heroes. I am currently reading their comics. As you know, DC heroes include Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman Flash"*. Participants who knew and enjoyed comics stated that they first encountered and appreciated them as children. P7F uttered: *"Actually, my first acquaintance with my father and the comics he brought us was through Comic Novels. I will never forget what happened to Asterix and Obélix. That's why it sounded so exciting to me as a child,"* establishing a connection between comic books and his childhood. The few participants who were introduced to comics by their families and began reading them viewed this art form as a fun and enjoyable book to read. It is assumed that prior to taking the course, these participants did not consider the educational value of comics and only viewed them as a form of enjoyable reading. This is also evident in some studies conducted in the United States, where the popularity of comics has steadily increased since the turn of the 20th century (McCarty and Smith, 1943; Sones, 1944; Carr, 1958). In these three studies, the entertaining aspect of comic books is discussed. According to the studies, this aspect of the comic has an effect on the readers. Even though a significant amount of time has passed since these studies, this aspect of the comic has not changed. This study is comparable to those conducted in the 20th century. Three participants said that they could not read the comics as much as they used to, and that they were excited and happy to have it come back into their lives with this course. The participants who were familiar with the comic book mentioned that it brings fun, humor, adventure, the importance of visuals and reading habits. It can be said that participant teachers used comics for reading habits before they took the lesson. While P4F was mentioning *"I actually read comics in order to gain a reading habit or to develop a foreign language, as I do at this time"*, we see that he utilised educational aspect of comics before the lesson. Also as Tekin and Ilhan (2021) state that comics is interesting and entertaining, has visuality and allows for concretization reveals that it is a very suitable tool for language teaching. In 1944, Sones discussed the same situation for the first time in his article, considering comics as an educational material. This study became a milestone with the

educational aspect of comics (Sones, 1944). Sones, by emphasizing the unnoticed educational aspect of the comic, reached a result similar to the one in this study. In other words, comics readers experience an educational process without realizing it.

While participants familiar to comics were easy to talk, it has been observed that those who have not read or met comics before avoid commenting. The opinions of the participants, who had the opportunity to get to know the comic through the use of comics course in the social studies education taken during their graduate education, are as follows: P2M stated that he viewed comics in a positive way with his words: *"I always had a positive opinion before I took the comic book course"*. However, a significant number of the participants did not know the difference between comics and cartoons before taking the course, and that they learned that these two are separate branches of art, as P3M stated in his words: *"It was thanks to the lesson that I took, comics in the social studies education. I realized that the comics is a different art"*. It has been observed that most of the teachers used the words 'comics' and 'cartoons' interchangeably before the lesson and even said that they generally call this type of art caricature. The reason for this situation may be that the caricature is more known in the society, is more common and is the pioneer of the drawing arts.

There were also changes in the participants' comic book reading habits after taking the course. It was observed that only three teachers read comic books prior to the lesson, but it was understood that all participants engaged in this activity following the lesson. P5F said: *"What did it contribute to me as a person? It was beneficial for me to form the habit of reading. Then he told me there was a comic book and introduced me to a new genre"*. In addition, P11F mentioned her first experience of reading comics as *"Certainly, it was a book about Atatürk given to me by a special friend, and I read it,.... Currently, I am primarily reading the American school Marvel series. I personally purchased it from the Marvel Series and reviewed it. I studied for this master's degree and for a business degree. In other words, it leads us to new worlds and expands our horizons."* As a result of the lesson, she developed the habit of reading comic books, as can be deduced. It is a remarkable situation in terms of the rapid spread of comic books and their widespread consumption. In fact, this situation is comparable to the findings of some studies on the immense popularity of comic books in American society and the analysis of its reading by all demographic groups (Witty, 1941; Martson, 1943). In both studies, it was emphasised that comic books are well-liked and quickly read. They reported that after the lesson, these teachers became aware of comics and spent time in the comics sections of libraries and bookstores. During these visits, they followed the publications and searched for comics that could be incorporated into education. Similarly, the 1941 study by Witty reveals similarities. According to Witty's research, comics are a popular genre in all segments of society because

they are easy to read, fluent, readable in short amounts of time, and easily accessible. (Witty, 1941; Carr, 1958).

Regarding the teachers' use of materials in education and the factors considered in the use of materials, they expressed numerous opinions. The codes created in light of participant opinions on the issues considered in the selection of materials in education and social studies instruction are *accessibility, suitable for socioeconomic situation, sufficient number, non-distracting material, sufficient number, suitable for the subject, appealing to the student, attracting attention, motivating and arousing curiosity*. P11F uttered *"First and foremost, the materials must be appropriate for the number of students in the class. Because we must be able to manage both time and students, as well as comprehend and explain the situation in the surrounding environment. There are also discipline issues because it is too distracting. The material should be followed up in a way that the instructor can use or direct. It should be pertinent to the topic, age- and class-appropriate, and not tedious"*. According to the response of the participant who works in a public school, it can be concluded that she prefers to select materials that are adaptable to each class size. In addition, we observe that materials that do not disrupt classroom discipline, do not interfere with the teacher's authority, and can be adapted to the subject are sought as a prerequisite during the selection process. P2M outlined his ideas as *"I favour using visual, or concrete, materials. The materials with which a child can interact one-on-one are significantly more important for making learning permanent"*. The type of materials participants preferred were smart boards, projections, virtual museums, Web 2.0 environments, educational sites, comics, literary texts, intelligence games, audio materials, photographs, pictures, tables, maps, objects, and spheres are the preferred types of materials. While P1M mentioned his ideas as *"The majority of the maps I use are... Alternatively, we can create comics with our students about learning outcomes"*, it is observed that the participant uses the prepared comic book materials prepared accordingly to the lesson objectives. Another participant (P8F) who prefers visual materials stated *"I prefer visual and audio materials over written materials. Aside from that, I prefer printed visual materials that I can give to students and that they can view directly"*. Due to the importance of abstract concepts in social studies education, we observe that the participants prefer visual materials. While visual aids such as maps, globes, smart boards, and overhead projectors are the first to come to mind, there are also claims that they employ drama, literary genres, and mind and intelligence games. Similar to this study, comics have been found supporting education in the studies of Rose (2022), Brugar & Roberts (2017); Önal, et al. (2017) and Ünlü (2016).

In the study, the positive opinions of the participants regarding the comics as a medium were that 'it embodies abstract issues, contributes to individual differences in teaching, instils reading habits, makes learning enjoyable, promotes long-term retention, and increases student motivation' while negative codes

included 'only as a form of entertainment, high cost, reluctance to read anything other than comic books, and lack of class time'. Numerous participants held the opinion that comic book material contributes to permanent learning, embodies abstract subjects, increases motivation towards the lesson, contributes to creative thought, and enables learning through play. P5F of respondents uttered: *"The positive aspects of using comics in social studies education to motivate students are also interesting. It develops their imaginations, enables them to come up with creative ideas, and encourages them to view events from a variety of angles. In addition, it teaches them how to incorporate the information they've learned and visuals to support their writing"*. Golding and Verrier (2020) has also found that comics and visuals positively affect students' understanding and attitudes. Participants viewed comics as being entertaining and enjoyable to read, and the classroom atmosphere was fun and enjoyable. Participants seemed relaxed and happy in the classes. This situation indicates that the comics as educational materials utilised in the course positively affect on the classroom environment. Similar to the thesis research conducted in Kaba, it was found that comic book content positively affects the classroom environment (2021). The use of comic book materials in the course is viewed as an important factor in increasing students' interest and motivation. Another participant, P1M, echoes this sentiment, stating that it is important *"to reinforce the positive aspects quickly, to give abstract subjects quickly, to embody them, to increase their permanence, and to have the opportunity to personally experience them..."*. Similarly, there are studies in the literature demonstrating that comic book material is effective at communicating difficult-to-explain abstract concepts. In Hutchinson (1949)'s study, teachers used comics to ease the learning of difficult topics. The 'making-easy' effect of comics is referred also in Chilcoat (1993), Bolton-Gray (2012); İlhan, Kaba and Şin (2021)'s studies. As a result of the comic book study, it was determined that comics had a positive impact on students' perceptions of democracy. In addition, İlhan and Oruc (2019) demonstrate the positive effects of comic book material in communicating abstract concepts. P9F stated *"I can tell the positive sides like, it fosters creativity in the child"*. K.2 expresses his opinion that it is a remarkable material by stating, *"Therefore, it has many advantages. Because visual learning is so frequently supported, this content is immediately engaging. I believe it will attract a large number of students because it expresses the emotional transitions of a very intense mood using sound effects"*. We can see that he focused on attention-getting aspect at first glance. Other studies have concluded that educational comics are effective in increasing student motivation for the lesson by removing the lesson from being ordinary and boring. For instance the studies of Şentürk (2022); Araya (2020); Hosler and Boomer (2011) signal that comics increases motivation by making teaching more effective. Also, Zimmerman (2008) mentions comics are effective in gaining reading habits by providing reading motivation because it is a

fun type to read. In addition, Hutchinson (1949) provides positive motivation towards the lesson, and Ishikura (2013) provides positive motivation towards the lesson. In similar to the current study, previous research demonstrates that the use of comics in the classroom increases student motivation.

As for the participants' negative views on comics as a educational materials, P1M stated, *"It's a waste of time; the social studies course has very few class hours"*. Another participant, P7M, uttered *"If I say the negative aspects, I can think of the negative side because, as I've observed in some children's classes, it does not go beyond being a means of enjoyment. Perhaps this is such a negative characteristic in some"*. Also, P3M mentioned *"It is important that the comics are appropriate for the child's reading level, or that the illustrations appeal to the child"* while P12F said *"The negative aspects are the only thing that comes to mind for me. It must find a compromise position. Additionally, the school must provide financial resources"*. Participants who expressed their negative views noted that they may have negative attitudes toward literary works other than comic books and emphasised the significance of financial opportunities. In general, participants took a considerable amount of time when asked about negative opinions and had difficulty identifying a negative aspect of themselves. Participants who viewed the shortness of the lesson time for comics also mentioned the limitedness of social studies lesson hours for any material. Regarding the use of comics in the classroom, participants working in both public and private schools uttered similar statements. It has been stated that as fact that comics are an entertaining literary genre prevents students from viewing it as educational. According to practitioner teachers, comics impacts classroom discipline negatively. The reason for this is that the students have never encountered such an art in the classroom, so they misjudge and see it for an extracurricular activity. In addition, the duration of the lesson was deemed inadequate for the use of comics. According to the participants, the use of comics in the classroom should be well-planned. Çiçek Şentürk's (2020) doctoral dissertation where argumentation-supported educational comics is used for students' interest in the environment, motivation, and academic success, is one of the studies that parallels the negative effect on classroom management resulting from the time limitation in the use of comics in education and the fact that it is an entertaining genre.

In the study, teachers who took the course on the use of comics in social studies instruction were asked about the course's impact on their professional and personal lives. In this context, the codes created based on the results obtained for their contribution to their professional life were 'publishing academic articles, increasing the difficulty of expression, preparing a comic book lesson plan, providing digital competence, increasing the ability to create materials, increasing professional motivation, increasing course dominance, and providing script writing skills, and improvement in communication with students'. The codes for their

contribution to individual life were ‘providing empathy, increasing motivation, increasing awareness of comics culture, increasing the ability to express oneself, blogging, developing the habit of reading comics, and contributing to creativity’. Regarding the impact of the use of comic books in social studies education on their personal and professional lives, P1M says, *"First and foremost, if I must speak for myself, I believe it has increased my capacity for empathy. I was attempting to comprehend life through the perspective of my students"*. According to him, this course assists teachers in comprehending and empathising with their students. Another participant, P2M emphasised the importance of empathy skills for students as *"...For instance, they can identify with and empathise with certain characters. I believed that they could be taught in this manner. Social studies lends itself well to this, so I would like to see comics used in social studies education"*. He argues that social studies should be supported due to the course's verbal focus and the need for empathic teaching skills. The reasons for teachers to use comic book material in the transfer of subjects such as citizenship and history where abstract concepts predominate can be enumerated as follows: It facilitates empathy and affords an opportunity by combining visuals and text. Considering the significance of empathy skills in comprehending abstract issues of history and citizenship, the studies investigating students' academic success, motivation and attitudes towards the course, experiences, and the impact it has on teaching are Damopolili, Lumembang, İlhan (2021)'s, Şentürk, Şimşek (2021)'s, Letizia (2021)'s, Saribiyik (2018)'s, İlhan (2016)'s and Joffe (2008)'. Graphic literature supports learning and teaching history (Barbre, Carroll & Tolbert, 2022). They all implied the positive effect of comics on students' academic success, motivation and attitudes towards social studies course.

As a professional gain, P2M uttered *"...after the lesson, our teacher and I published an article together; it was a great help to me and made a significant professional contribution to the field. How do I personally and independently design a comic in this process? What are the design phases and what should be taken into account? Once, it allowed me to master the literature of comic books"*. While stating that he had the opportunity to become more familiar with comics on an individual level, he states that this course taught him how to adapt this genre as a teaching material, how to design and use it in accordance with the subject and outcome. After completing the course, he contributed to his professional life by writing publications and articles. In addition, another participants stated that she increased her digital competence in designing materials by learning the applications that allowed him to design comic book material in the digital environment with the words: *"It piqued my interest so much that I devoted considerable effort to preparing the comic"* (P4F). As a result of the lesson, the participants have utilised the digital environment when preparing comic book content. In general, we observed that the participants made extensive use of the Pixton throughout the

course. Due to the digital environment's user-friendliness, participants were able to create their own original comic book materials with relative ease while designing comics.

As a course output, it is evident that the participants, who reported enjoying the course repeatedly, agreed to incorporate new material into their professional lives. In this context, one of the course participants, P4F outlined *"producing a comic book and then writing it up as an article and creating the first article in this field was the most significant outcome for me"*. They stated that they made progress starting with comics material and continuing with the article. Thus, it can be seen that the course's digital comic book output was transformed into an article and contributed to the academic field. In their post-lesson reflections, social studies teachers noted an improvement in their digital skills as a result of using the Pixton Web 2.0 tool to create comics, as compared to their pre-lesson perspectives. Similar results were discovered in a study conducted with social studies teacher candidates using Pixton; the participants' digital skills improved (Kiriş Avarogullari & Mutlu, 2019). This situation suggests that the Pixton Web 2.0 tool contributes positively to the digital skills of its users. It is stated that teachers' professional motivation increased after incorporating comic book material into their social studies classes. Digital materials that are age-appropriate and thus provide the opportunity to get to know the current generation intimately are viewed as a situation that increases the dominance of teachers in the field. Participating teachers mentioned the products of the course as the comics they created as educational materials, as well as the thesis (Keskin, 2022; Kaba, 2021) and academic studies (Kaba, Şin, and İlhan, 2020; İlhan, Kaba, and Şin, 2021; Keskin, and İlhan, 2021; Ak, Erdoğan, and İlhan, 2020; Çelik, and İlhan, 2020; Secmez, and İlhan, 2021; Kavak and İlhan, 2021; Özdemir, İlhan and Oruc, 2022).

The aim of this study was to understand the reflections/effects of "Use of Comics in Social Studies Education" course, which was reopened for education and social studies education, on the participants (social studies teachers) taking the course. It has been determined that the course had educational, professional, and artistic effects on teachers. While the teachers gained a new perspective on their respective fields, they were also exposed to a new art form. Teachers who claimed to have benefited from the lesson stated that their professional qualities were bolstered by the innovations they could implement with their students in the classroom.

Recommendations

- Similar courses can be offered at undergraduate and graduate levels in different universities.
- Comic book materials that are accepted as pedagogically appropriate for the subject and achievements can be developed by experts.

- Trainings on the use of comics in education can be given in order to support the professional development processes of teachers.
- The number of trainings that will support teachers' digital skills in designing and using materials suitable for the younger generations can be increased.

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January 2024

Developing and Sustaining a Graphic Scholarship Collection for Academic Libraries

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Recommended Citation

Brower, Stewart; Hoberecht, Toni; Ratcliffe, Zane; and Seay, Bethie (2024) "Developing and Sustaining a Graphic Scholarship Collection for Academic Libraries," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 8, Article 3.

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INTRODUCTION

Since being coined by Richard Kyle back in 1964, the term “graphic novels” has served to differentiate longer-form comic book narratives from regular monthly serials, but also to give comics a degree of recognition as something potentially more important. Not unlike “sequential art” as a descriptor for the comics artform itself, the idea of graphic novels seems intended to elevate the work above its roots. This has led to some controversy, with recognized authors such as Alan Moore (Kavanagh, 2013) and Neil Gaiman (Weldon, 2016) eschewing the term as unneeded and overly commercial. Jeff Smith, creator of *Bone*, said of *graphic novels*: “It’s trying too hard” (Rogers, 2010).

This problem gets further muddled when one looks at the most recent trends in original graphic novels to recount stories from history and memoirs, or to explain complex ideas of science and philosophy, or to tell any story that’s not strictly fiction. The term “nonfiction graphic novels” is an oxymoron at best, and “graphic nonfiction” feels like a description of some particularly gruesome real-world event.

The Schusterman Library at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa (OU-Tulsa) wrestled with these ideas when naming the collection it founded in 2021. Consisting primarily of nonfiction comics and built to enhance the library’s mission to serve a diverse student body, this new collection would quickly resonate with the OU-Tulsa community, but it needed a name that inspired users to pay attention, browse the shelves, and borrow the books.

With that in mind, the Schusterman Library launched their Graphic Scholarship Collection. This paper will examine the history behind this collection, the selection and acquisition of materials, the organization and classification of the books, how the collection enhances the service mission of the library, and future directions for this fledgling effort.

BACKGROUND

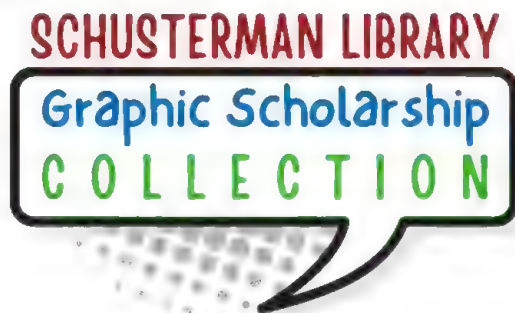
In the summer of 2020, the director of the Schusterman Library, Stewart Brower, conducted a brief non-credit-bearing workshop series titled “The History and Language of Comics.” Hosted on the Google Classroom platform, enrollment in the workshops was open to any student in a Library and Information Sciences (LIS) program. The workshops were designed as a trial run for Brower to get student feedback before proposing a semester-long elective to the University of Oklahoma School of Library and Information Studies (OU SLIS). The proposed elective would focus on three major areas of understanding: The syntax and critical language of sequential art, the history of comics in the United States, and the roles of libraries and librarians. The proposed elective was accepted into the OU SLIS program for Spring 2021 and taught as an online course for 3 credit hours. The

course shows promise to continue as a part of the rotating LIS electives, as it was accepted and taught a second time for Spring 2023.

In preparing for the course, Brower, who had read and collected comics since the 1970s, was surprised to discover the breadth of nonfiction materials now in comics form. This led to informal discussions in the Fall of 2020 with Toni Hoberecht, Technical Services Librarian, who suggested we begin by surveying potential titles for purchase and work up a starting budget. Both Brower and Hoberecht were familiar with graphic medicine as a subject area, and a bibliography of titles was readily available through GraphicMedicine.org.¹ Later, a bibliography of “non-fiction graphic novels” on the books review site Goodreads.com helped with identifying non-medical titles.² No standard library selection tool or core bibliography was identified. A tentative budget of \$2000 was set and acquisition of titles began in earnest in January 2021.

Among the earliest acquisitions was *The Murder of Emmett Till* by Karlos Hill (2021). Hill is an associate professor and chair of the Clara Luper Department of African and African-American Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oklahoma. A premier work of graphic history written by an expert scholar from our home institution managed to both demonstrate the validity of the new collection while simultaneously setting the bar rather high.

Figure 1. Schusterman Library Graphic Scholarship Collection logo, from Emrys Moreau.



Interest in the new collection grew somewhat quickly during the first year. A colorful graphic was designed in-house by librarian Emrys Moreau and used as signage (Figure 1). General interest workshops on graphic medicine and graphic scholarship were conducted in Spring 2021, and a second workshop series was held during the summer. Faculty members in programs as diverse as Community Medicine, Architecture and Urban Design, and the Center for Studies in Democracy

¹ <https://www.graphicmedicine.org/essentialgm/>

² https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/17254.Non_Fiction_Comics_and_Graphic_Novels

and Culture all showed interest in the work being done with the collection and requested either consultation in matters of visual literacy or workshops and classes for their programs. Circulation of graphic scholarship materials was generally strong, and within the first year, were the most-requested print items in the collection.

Collection use and circulation were off to a strong start, workshops and other programming were successful, and publicity surrounding our work was beginning to grow (Graham, 2022). However, the library team identified several key problems that do not have easy solutions.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

ACQUISITIONS & SELECTION

Perhaps the root issue is one of being able to identify new graphic novels that are appropriate for the collection. Early discussions and investigations by the library team revealed no standard bibliography from which to draw, and so the approach to identifying books was somewhat haphazard. Initial selection was through firsthand knowledge, occasionally from GoodReads.com or GraphicMedicine.org, or recommendations from Amazon.com. Often one of the library team would simply happen across an appropriate graphic novel in a bookstore or on social media. Publisher catalogs and websites are often vague about things like intended audience, and so some graphic novels targeted at children or pre-teen/young adult readers were purchased. Without reliable publisher information, getting ahead of new graphic nonfiction titles before they are published is nearly impossible. One notable new resource is the Adult Comics & Graphic Novels Announcements feature by *Publishers Weekly*, which explicitly separates titles by audience and therefore helps us avoid accidentally purchasing more juvenile materials. This feature had its inaugural publication in a January 2023 issue of the journal and has already been useful in identifying upcoming titles. We hope that more resources like this will emerge, but for now it seems to be an outlier (Lemke, 2023).

After some trial and error, a provisional list of sources for graphic scholarship print monographs was developed. This list is not perfect; some sources offer mainly traditional comic books or YA graphic novels with only a few items that could be classified as “graphic scholarship,” so a lot of time is spent sifting through lists of items that do not qualify for our collection. However, if an item from one of those lists is identified as “graphic scholarship,” then we can search for other items by the same author or by the same publisher to see if other appropriate items can be found. Occasionally the books themselves will contain lists of graphic novels supplied by the publisher.

Award lists such as Wikipedia's *List of Award-Winning Graphic Novels* (2022) provide resources for graphic scholarship, although sources like these are infrequently updated. Social media and email listservs occasionally provide useful recommendations and discussions, but these sources cannot be relied on for a steady stream of relevant materials.

Given that we refer to a small list of sources periodically and search for publishers and authors when they seem promising, selection remains a time-intensive activity. We still rely on serendipitous recommendations from library staff and from library users who are interested in the mission of the Graphic Scholarship collection.

AGE APPROPRIATENESS

Without reliable catalog information for each book being acquired, the Schusterman Library inadvertently purchased several titles that were clearly intended for children or young adults. For the most part we have maintained these titles in the collection, as many are seminal or award-winning titles. Some of the young-adult titles were purchased consciously as their subject matter aligned with campus teaching and research interests, such as the Science Comics series from First Second Press, featuring titles like *Skyscrapers: The Heights of Engineering* and *The Digestive System: A Tour Through Your Guts*. We speculated that these titles could serve as entry points for casual readers who encountered the collection without having a specific interest in graphic scholarship. In addition, they might fit the needs of programs like Early Childhood Education.

RIGOR

Similarly, although many of the nonfiction titles are clearly intended as memoir, and not subject to the kind of rigor expected of scholarly communications, some graphic nonfiction is lightly researched, and takes greater liberty with the narrative than would be expected in any academic publication. Although the memoir is not a genre known for its methodological rigor, memoirs have been selected because they offer insight into lived experiences that may align with campus interests, since our campus hosts Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Public Health, and Allied Health. For example, several memoirs by doctors, nurses, and other health professionals, as well as of patients and family members of patients, are included in the collection. Memoirs, even those intended for a younger audience, can provide valuable insight from a patient perspective that benefits students in programs such as medicine and social work.

ALIGNMENT WITH CAMPUS INTERESTS

Not all graphic nonfiction in the Schusterman Library collection necessarily aligns with a specific degree program, although such alignment is desirable. Many are of general historical interest, and a number of titles support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts on campus. Incidentally, one of the library's earlier memoir purchases, *Gender Queer*, became the most challenged book in the United States in 2021, due to its LGBTQIA+ themes.³ With the rise of book bans and challenges in the last few years, particularly for titles related to race, gender, and sexuality, we could see another increase in scholarly research surrounding censorship. This is especially true in the field of librarianship, which has a long history of championing intellectual freedom, as well as other fields and disciplines (Alter, 2022).

This is just one example of the many titles that can serve campus and community interests, even while lacking academic rigor or age appropriateness. Materials aimed at a younger audience or with younger characters can still be relevant in higher education, particularly when those materials discuss larger themes in our society such as censorship, diversity, discrimination, and mental health.

SHELVING LIMITATIONS

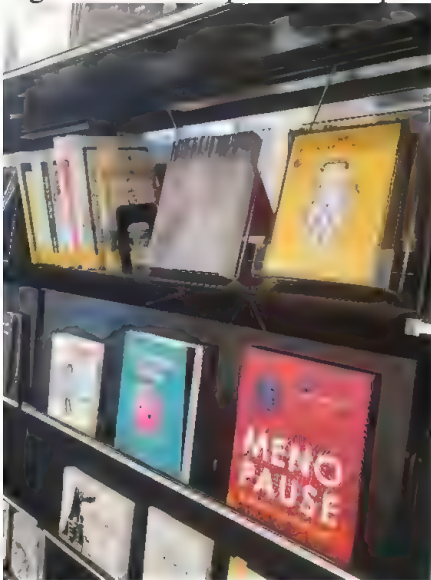
A standard twelve-foot long, double-sided shelving unit was chosen to hold the collection (Figure 2). Located in a well-trafficked area on the first floor, the unit includes steel cantilever periodical shelves. Periodical shelving is flat with a wide lip at the bottom, allowing narrow-width materials to face outward, rather than being shelved like standard books. We conjectured that having the graphic novel covers facing outward would improve browsability and help show off the collection best (Figure 3). Each shelf is three feet long, and the range has 48 shelves total, giving 144 feet of display area initially. This would prove inadequate as the collection grew beyond the first six months of purchases.

³ <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10/archive#2021>

Figure 2. The Graphic Scholarship Collection's shelving unit.



Figure 3. Close-up of the Graphic Scholarship Collection's shelves.



The shelving unit is attractive and practical, but limits the collection in a few key ways. Although having the books face outward makes them more visible and easier to browse, some of these graphic novels are thicker than average, and the lip of the shelf cannot accommodate them. The top range of shelves is too tall to be practical for use, so 24 linear feet of display is unusable. However, these upper shelves may be repurposed for signage.

Most problematic, though, is that the growth of the collection rapidly outpaced the periodical display shelves' capacity. Some of these shelves have been replaced with standard flat bookshelves to allow for the additional titles. This combination of shelving is a short-term solution to capacity issues but has created additional challenges for staff when shelf-reading or trying to quickly view call numbers.

ORGANIZATION OF THE COLLECTION

None of the staff involved in managing the new collection had previous experience in graphic novels, graphic nonfiction, or comics. Although we knew that there were special considerations for managing these types of items, our priority was to get the collection cataloged, classified, and made available for users as soon as possible.

Titles were purchased, catalogued, and classified according to Library of Congress (LC) monograph standards, with the understanding that this was just an initial cataloging attempt that was bound to be incomplete and possibly incorrect; our interest at that moment was getting the books on the shelves.

Classification introduced unforeseen challenges, however. At this time, Zane Ratcliffe was the Library Technician who conducted this work and operated from long-standing LC rules, following best practices for classifying monographs. LC classification of graphic novels typically places all such works under a single classification span, PN6700-6790, under the broader heading of "Comic books, strips, etc." with only children's titles being classified separately.⁴ This classification assigns all graphic novels together by their format, rather than by topic or subject matter.

Often when graphic novels are shelved according to this classification, the collection orientation will be imprecise, and will make the collection challenging to browse. Some of the graphic medicine titles followed National Library of Medicine (NLM) classification, making them more aligned with their general subject areas, but topic areas such as history, psychology, political science, economics, etc. were not primarily considered when classifying the graphic novels. We had overlooked the possibility of using LC genre/form term subdivisions, which would have given us the opportunity to assign more appropriate subject headings, and had not anticipated that the clustering of material classifications would lead to difficulties as the collection grew.

After the collection had grown significantly, our interest began to center on the findability of the materials in the library's catalog and on the shelves. In Spring of 2022, a reorganization project was led by Bethie Seay, Assistant Technical Services Librarian. The original range of call numbers, PN6700-6790, would be

⁴ <https://www.loc.gov/aba/cyac/graphicnovels.html>

helpful if the titles were shelved together with traditional monographs in a larger collection so that users could easily locate the graphic nonfiction section. However, the separate physical shelving of the Graphic Scholarship collection would benefit more from titles being arranged by subject. Seay evaluated every title in the collection to determine whether or not its call number reflected its discipline. The majority of the collection was given new call numbers by using a combination of LC and NLM classification. The initial reorganization project was finished by the Summer, but this classification issue will be an ongoing effort. Documentation, including a local classification guide, was created to ensure consistency as new materials are continuously added.

The recent distribution of *Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using RDA and MARC 21* by the American Library Association's Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (2022) has also had an impact on our cataloging practices. The document was heavily consulted to identify the Graphic Scholarship collection's bibliographic shortcomings. Our records were particularly inconsistent in subject description and the way that series were cataloged. After reviewing the document, we were able to develop documentation for our own best practices for cataloging the collection and then create plans to improve our catalog's records.

Figure 4. Search result in Primo displaying an individual issue of a series.

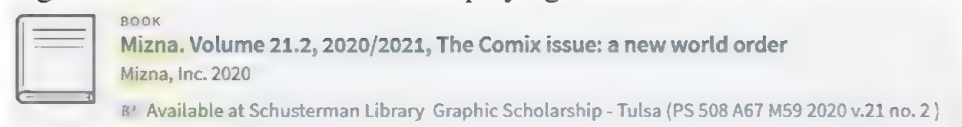
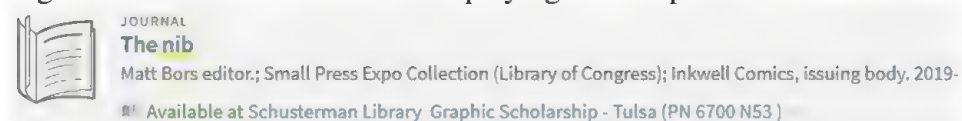


Figure 5. Search result in Primo displaying a multi-part series.



Series arrangement was one of the more complicated cataloging decisions to make, as we could either create individual bibliographic records for each part of a series or create a multi-volume monographic bibliographic record for an entire series with each part being a separate item. The former would allow for richer descriptions of contributors to individual parts. The latter would provide more streamlined discovery results in the online catalog. After much deliberation, we chose a hybrid method: any series that we own multiple parts of will be cataloged as a serial record, while any lone issue of a series would be cataloged on its own. This combination prioritizes user-friendliness in the catalog as well as detailed descriptions for contributors. When the library only owns one part of a series, it is

usually due to the local relevance of the contributors to that specific issue. Figure 4 shows an example of a search result for an individual issue, and Figure 5 shows a serial that includes multiple items within our catalog.⁵

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT POLICY

A collection development policy for the collection was written well after the collection was already established:

Graphic Scholarship Collection: This collection consists of comics, graphic novels, and heavily illustrated monographs where comics/sequential art techniques are applied. Also included are scholarly communications (monographs, journals) that contribute to comics scholarship, particularly in the areas of graphic medicine, graphic science, graphic social science, graphic history, or any graphic scholarship that contributes to any of the disciplines represented at OU-Tulsa. This collection also includes other comics or non-comics materials that support the aims and objectives of the Graphic Scholarship project, including zines with a connection of any kind to Graphic Scholarship.⁶

The policy became part of the Schusterman Library's general collection development policy which can be found on the library's website.

The library began acquiring items under this policy starting in early 2020 and the collection now contains over 300 items. The total value of these items as of June 2023 was \$7,272.94, based on the original purchase price of the items, with an average purchase price of \$21.91. 124 items were purchased in 2020-2021, for an average purchase price of \$19.96, and a total purchase price of \$2,474.63, 94 items in 2021-2022 for an average purchase price of \$23.44, and a total purchase price of \$2,203.70, and 114 items in 2022-2023, for an average purchase price of \$22.76, and total purchase price of \$2,594.61 (Table 1).

⁵ https://ou-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/search?vid=OUTULSA&lang=en_US

⁶ <https://library.tulsa.ou.edu/collection-development-policy>

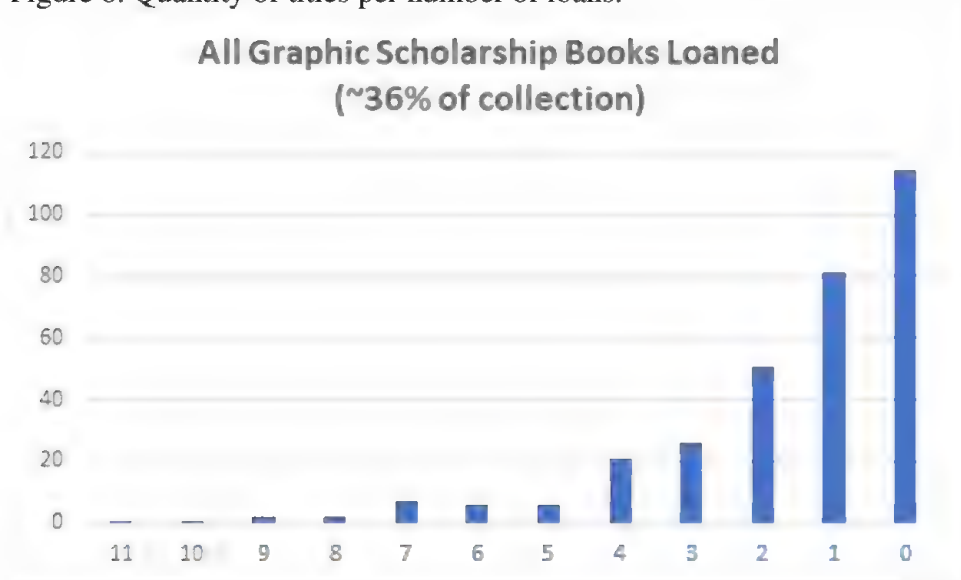
Table 1. Purchase prices of the Graphic Scholarship Collection.

Year	Number of Items	Average Purchase Price (USD)	Total Purchase Price (USD)
2020-2021	124	\$19.96	\$2,474.63
2021-2022	94	\$23.44	\$2,203.70
2022-2023	114	\$22.76	\$2,594.61
Total	332	\$21.91	\$7,272.94

CIRCULATION

Items in the graphic scholarship collection have circulated at about the same rate as other monographs in the library. As of December 2022, about 108 items, or 36%, of the individual items in the collection have been checked out at least once. For our library on our small campus, these are acceptable circulations trends. Figure 6 shows a breakdown of the number of times graphic scholarship items have circulated.

Figure 6. Quantity of titles per number of loans.

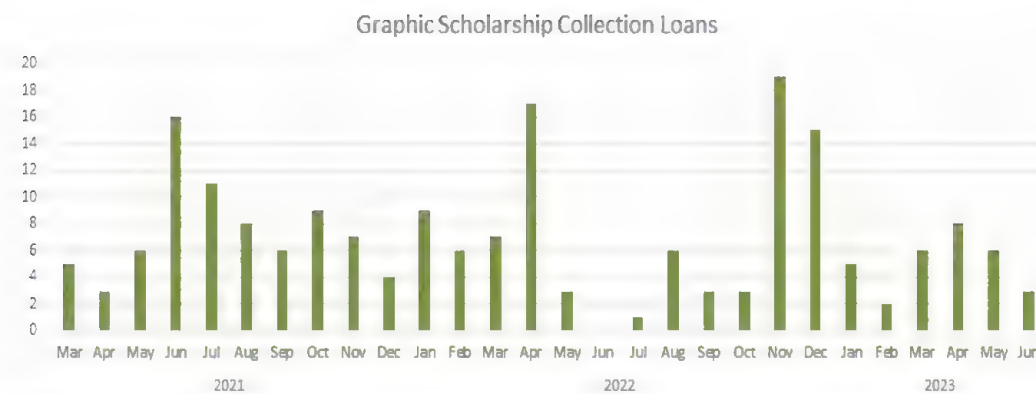


A few very popular books (*Maus*, *Gender Queer*, *Persepolis*) have been checked out at least seven times. These are all titles that have been in the news for one reason or another and have high general visibility.

Figure 7 shows loans from the Graphic Scholarship collection over time. There have been 194 loans from the collection as of July 2023; this does not include in-house loans, where items have been reshelfed after use but not checked out. In

the collection's inaugural year, 2021, there were 75 loans, and 89 loans in 2022. Loans are slightly down for 2023 at only 30, but the library anticipates an increase when the fall semester (and targeted marketing of our collections) begins.

Figure 7. Loans by month of the Graphic Scholarship Collection.



DISCUSSION AND OUTCOMES

The campus community has been very receptive to the collection and the idea of “Graphic Scholarship” thus far. This acceptance has allowed the collection to grow and evolve into more than a physical collection of titles. The initiative has given the library an opportunity to position itself as a place for exploring the arts on a campus with no other arts programming. By using the collection as a scaffold, the library can build programming and strengthen connections through a medium that would be otherwise absent.

Some of this programming has included library workshops, both online via Zoom and in-person, and course-directed programming. One campus elective from the School of Community Medicine focuses on the arts. This *Arts & Medicine* course meets every fall semester and now includes a graphic medicine component, co-instructed by the library team. Students explore the comics collection firsthand and then receive a lecture on graphic scholarship, including hands-on drawing exercises from Lynda Barry’s *Making Comics* (2019). Additional library workshops have focused on the nature of sequential art and graphic storytelling, comics studies and criticism, and specific works of graphic scholarship. Over 100 faculty, staff, and students have engaged with these workshops to date.

In addition to time spent on programming, staff have also dedicated considerable hours to cataloging and processing the Graphic Scholarship materials. At the collection’s inception, over 175 items were copy-cataloged in a short amount of time, and staff hours were devoted to shifting and creating a physical space for the collection, copy-cataloging and processing each item, and getting items on the

shelf. Additional items were then ordered and received in smaller amounts, and time spent copy-cataloging and processing waned, until the decision was made to reclassify and reorganize the collection. The reclassification project alone consumed an estimated 72 hours of work. Those hours included analyzing the titles for subject matter, identifying the new call numbers, editing local bibliographic records, and changing spine labels. Time is also spent on shelf maintenance whenever the collection outgrows a section of front-facing shelves and requires more flat shelving. The additional time spent on receiving and copy-cataloging new titles has become negligible, except for the occasional need for original cataloging of a unique title. Like any other endeavor, the collection has impacted staff time and will inevitably continue to do so.

Acquisition issues were challenging at first; in our library most selections are based strictly on curricular needs and direct requests from faculty and students. Selection for the graphic scholarship collection occurs in consultation with the library director, who is the chief curator of the collection. However, the director has made clear that the technical services librarian is also responsible for discovering new sources of appropriate material, and making purchasing decisions independently. Having what amounts to a free hand in selection feels like a recipe for chaos, but in true technical librarian style, that chaos is beginning to be codified and classified.

The challenges that came with cataloging the collection have had positive results on library processes. The unique bibliographic needs served as a catalyst to solidify and document local best practices for metadata for all collections. Prior to the graphic scholarship cataloging projects, there was little written policy regarding local practices for MARC records. This created a risk of inaccuracy and inconsistency during staffing changes as institutional knowledge could be easily lost. Documentation has since been created to explain best practices for cataloging and classifying the Graphic Scholarship collection, which has then inspired more documentation for other collections in the library. The next step for the bibliographic side of the collection is to perform catalog enhancements following these newly minted best practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The success of the Graphic Scholarship Collection at the OU-Tulsa Schusterman Library has been very organic and has come about due in very large part to the passionate support of the library team. Going forward, it is hoped that this collection and the programming around it will begin to take on more structure and gain some recognition on an institutional level.

The library's catalog and documentation have already become more structured as a result of this new endeavor. The Technical Services team faced the

challenge of reorganizing and cataloging this new collection to fit in amongst our existing system and came out the other side with more concrete policies that benefit our catalog and users. Cataloging Graphic Scholarship items will be an ongoing endeavor as the collection continues to grow, but there have already been marked improvements to subject description, contributor acknowledgement, series tracing, and other consistencies that improve users' abilities to access the collection.

Building on the success of the "Arts & Medicine" class component, additional course offerings will be actively sought out with faculty in programs like Education, Social Work, and Human Relations, while informal workshops will continue to be offered. To support these efforts, the library will build a comics art studio equipped with an analog drafting table and art supplies, and a digital comics creation workstation with drawing tablet and appropriate software. This studio will give faculty, researchers, staff, and students an environment to learn more about the comics production process and to develop new comics of their own.

Some fledgling efforts in this direction have already begun. A recent express outreach award from the Networks of the National Library of Medicine is funding the publication of a comic for the *Professor Paws Project*, a public awareness effort focused on educating people on the value of service animals.⁷ The intention is to publish a standard "floppy" comic to be freely distributed at workshops and health fairs within the next year. At the time of this writing, the script has been completed and an artist is being sought for the project. Other researchers on campus have shown interest in producing similar comics in the future.

With the push toward producing new educational comics, the library team hopes to gain recognition and elevate institutional awareness of the program. Being recognized by the University of Oklahoma as a "Center" and receiving new permanent funding would be the best outcome. The collection's vision and goals can be found on the library website.⁸

What is clear is that even on a campus with no arts or humanities faculty or programs, the Schusterman Library has developed a collection that generates new interest in reading, educates students, demonstrates new potential routes for scholarly communications, and inspires creativity among our campus population. For now, it is clearly a success.

⁷ <https://www.ou.edu/tulsa/professorpaws>

⁸ <https://library.tulsa.ou.edu/index.php/graphic-scholarship>

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January 2024

From Panels to Shelves: The Evolving Intersection of Comics And Italian Libraries. History, Issues, Perspectives

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Recommended Citation

Tosti, Andrea (2024) "From Panels to Shelves: The Evolving Intersection of Comics And Italian Libraries. History, Issues, Perspectives," *SANE journal: Sequential Art Narrative in Education*: Vol. 2: Iss. 8, Article 4. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sane/vol2/iss8/4>

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From Panels to Shelves: The Evolving Intersection of Comics And Italian Libraries. History, Issues, Perspectives

Cover Page Footnote

I want to thank Vitantonio Troiani, with whom I originally conceived this article.

INTRODUCTION: THE HOW AND WHY OF COMICS IN THE LIBRARY

Public reading libraries are called upon to offer a service that responds to the needs of their community and must, therefore, be able to adapt to a constantly changing society.

(Raimondi 2019, 38)¹

Although a few decades old, the relationship between comics and libraries must be better investigated, especially in Italy. This gap in research is surprising given the popularity and cultural significance of comics in Italy and their role in shaping national culture and identity.

To bridge this gap, one must recognize how this medium has been perceived, told, and communicated, particularly regarding what has often been referred to as its audience of choice: children and adolescents. Long considered 'children's stuff,' comics have, consequently, borne this label's ideological and pedagogical weight, and this kind of perception influenced and, to some extent, hindered their integration into libraries.

Comics, as a mass phenomenon and a hybrid medium blending text and images, have been perceived differently over time. It has been labeled as a negative influence on younger people, considered junk literature, seen as a gateway to more traditional and 'serious' forms of literature, and even regarded as an impediment to developing reading and writing skills. Throughout this process, parallel to their intellectual and commercial reevaluation, comics have struggled to secure a place in traditional, text-focused libraries.

The association with a children's audience and a preference for more traditional knowledge conveyance persist even today, despite comics increasingly populating the collections of Italian public libraries. Furthermore, librarians confront challenges in comics' storytelling and marketing, exacerbated by a general lack of visual education. Difficulties arise from story arcs spread across issues, varied formats, and classification ambiguity of comics as books or illustrations, all lacking standardized criteria for acquisition, cataloging, and preservation.

While international academic interest in the relationship between comics and libraries is slowly growing, even if unevenly, the same cannot be said for Italy, where an underfunded and understaffed library system has prioritized other issues. However, comics can be a crucial resource for Italian libraries. Comics have the potential to serve a dual role. They can help libraries fulfill one of their primary functions: to reflect the society they engage with (Solimine and Faggiolani 2015). Additionally, comics have the power to attract, diversify, and expand the user base of libraries.

Furthermore, Italy boasts a rich and relevant comics tradition that deserves valorization, primarily through a more conscious presence on library shelves.

In conjunction with this, the contemporary educational landscape emphasizes the importance of visual literacy, and that brings comics into play as well. The very concept of literacy needs to be rethought because, as Sinatra (1986, 10) notes, "culture's predominant mode of literacy depends on the technology and mass media it embraces." Lewis (2001, 60) adds, "Competence with images is now a prerequisite of competence in life." Furthermore, regarding the perception of comics as child stuff, visual literacy should not be confined to higher education but should begin in the early years of critical development (Zanin-Yost 2014, 314).

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

By understanding and addressing the challenges surrounding the integration of comics into libraries, Italy can harness the potential of this medium to enhance its cultural and educational landscape, providing a more inclusive and diverse reading experience for library users. This integration aligns with international standards, such as the ACRL Visual Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (2011), highlighting the global significance of visual literacy education. As Italy stands at the crossroads of acknowledging the wealth of its visual culture, this article aims to contribute to the discourse on integrating comics and visual literacy into the fabric of Italian libraries, ultimately enriching the educational experience for a diverse and dynamic audience (MacDonald 2013).

Furthermore, increasing the presence of comics in libraries could bring some unexplored economic benefits. This is because the dissemination of comics in libraries can be considered by comics publishers as an effective marketing tool (Schneider 2014, 77) since “libraries, bookstores, and online channels mutually reinforce each other, leading to engagement and sales” (Noorda and Berens 2021, 237).

The relationship between comics, libraries, and their target audiences will be explored, as well as the role of the librarians – who are often the main driver and support of this integration – examining how comics collections are managed and the benefits they can bring to libraries' cultural and recreational offerings.

COMICS, LIBRARIES, AND LIBRARIANS: AN OVERVIEW

Institutional interest in comics is a relatively recent development, particularly evident in the United States, where reflections on the comics-library relationship emerged in the 1980s (Dorrell and Carroll 1981). Despite this, as noted by Williams and Peterson in 2009, “Two decades ago, graphic novels were virtually unknown to librarians and educators” (166), a situation that persisted for decades (Lavin 1998). The turning point came around 1990 when the first article about comics appeared in a U.S. library journal (Nyberg 2010, 32), and “by 2005, graphic novels were being regularly reviewed in journals frequently used by public and school librarians” (Williams and Peterson 2009, 177). While acknowledging the historical skepticism towards comics, highlighted by R. Weiner and Syma in 2014 with the observation that “since comics first became big business in the 1930s, comics or graphic novels have had a sordid history and relationship with librarians” (R. Weiner and Syma 2014), and it is evident that the situation has only partially evolved, with some notable progress. Despite enduring reservations, often rooted in misconceptions like the perception of comics as solely pornographic (Bergin 2005, 23), librarians have increasingly recognized the positive impact of including comics in their collections. Such inclusions have been associated with heightened circulation of non-comics texts, increased patronage, and enhanced user interaction with the library (Dorrell and Carroll 1981; Bergin 2005; Heaney 2007; Lo et al. 2019; MacDonald 2013), also extending to adult readers, particularly in Canada (Charbonneau 2005). Furthermore, comics serve as both an incentive for reading and a crucial support for visual literacy (Vitella 2020).

While the U.S. example may feel distant, a closer comparison can be drawn with France, a country not only geographically and culturally closer to Italy but also deeply entwined in shared comic interests. In France, where this medium's cultural and economic value surpasses that of many European counterparts,² comics have been integrated into school curricula since the post-World War II period (Berthou 2011). Notably, a strong correlation between comics and traditional reading has been observed in French libraries. While 28% of the French population over the age of 11 is enrolled in a public library, this figure rises to 48% when focusing on comics readers alone

² The French comics market ranks first in Europe, followed by Italy (Curcio 2016, 391). Furthermore, better economic conditions and prospects led to a ‘migration’ of Italian comics makers to France, beginning in the 1970s (Comberiat 2018).

(Guilbert 2015, 6). This trend persists despite a 50% decline in comics readership from 1988 to 2018 (Lombardo and Wolff 2020).

Contextualizing these observations, 7.9 million French people, constituting 14% of the population aged 15 and over, purchase comics, contributing to 13% of total bookstore sales (Oury 2020). In contrast, the comics market slice in Italy ranges between 2% and 6% (Eudicom 2021), though this may be an underestimate (Fumettologica 2021). Despite a decline in the Italian publishing market in 2022 compared to its outstanding 2021 performance, the market share for comics surged by 245.4% (from 13.7% to 47.3%) in the first six months of 2022 compared to the same pre-pandemic period in 2019 (AIE 2022b).

Understanding the evolution of the comics market is crucial to contextualizing the relationship between comics, libraries, and audiences. Beyond national differences, the whole world comics market is growing. According to *Business Fortune Insight*, the global size of this segment was estimated at USD 14.69 billion in 2021, with a forecast of growth to USD 21.37 billion by 2029 (Business Fortune Insight 2022). The comics market in North America alone is worth a billion dollars (Reid 2021), sustained mainly by manga (Greenall 2021; Griep 2021) and the so-called graphic novels distributed by the book channels.³ Consequently, the presence of comics in schools and libraries is also increasing, forming an economically attractive market for publishers, as already pointed out for years, for example, by Hudson (2009) and Pyles (2013). It can be reasonably assumed that libraries are or can be equally attractive to Italian comics publishers.

Against this backdrop, the pivotal role of librarians comes to the forefront. Aligned with Solimine and Faggiolani's (2015) model of a library attuned to the needs of its user community, there has been a notable uptick in library comics acquisition in recent decades. As highlighted by Shapel, events coordinator at the Boise Public Library in Idaho, U.S., "For a library to stay relevant, we have to keep up on what people are doing currently [...] to make people aware that we're right there with you, and we're going to change and evolve as the community changes" (quoted in Baume 2017).

This shift places specific demands on librarians dealing with comics, requiring specific skills, including a good level of visual literacy. While librarians are recognized for their potential leadership in information literacy programs (Chen and Lin 2011, 405), questions linger about their readiness to manage comics collections consciously. The prevailing sentiment suggests that the field lacks codification, relying heavily on the initiative and passion of individuals, often spurred by the interest of younger readers.

The quote "comics and libraries are, hopefully, destined to be bedfellows and will need to support each other" (Phoenix 2020, 213) encapsulates the envisioned collaboration between comics and libraries. Such collaboration, however, still needs to be improved in many aspects. Comics force librarians to reconsider all aspects of the profession, regarding "the capacity of the staff to take the measure of the variety of the audiences of comics" (Berthou 2015, 5) but also cataloging, display, and mediation (Guilbert 2015; Berthou 2015; 2011; Vitella 2020).

In short, do librarians possess the necessary skills to handle comics effectively? Does the field's perceived lack of codification leave much of the work to the initiative and passion of individuals? These questions highlight the ongoing challenges and opportunities for librarians in managing and integrating comics into their collections.

³ The predominance of manga and graphic novels can also be seen in Italy (AIE 2022a; 2023).

AIM AND PURPOSES OF THE RESEARCH

This article provides an initial and exploratory investigation into the state of managing comics collections in Italian public libraries.

Comics are essential in both commercial and cultural domains within Italian cultural production. However, their connection with libraries and their role within these vital institutions remain underexplored or insufficiently investigated.

An attempt will then be made to answer several questions:

1. **Historical and contemporary relationship between comics and Italian libraries:**
 - What has historically defined the relationship between comics and Italian libraries, and how does this dynamic manifest in the present?
2. **Perception of comics as 'children's stuff' and its impact on library collections:**
 - How does the lingering perception of comics as primarily for children affect their acquisition within library collections?
3. **Challenges in the acquisition, cataloging, preservation, communication, and lending of comics in Italian libraries:**
 - What specific obstacles are associated with acquiring, cataloging, preserving, communicating, and lending comics in the context of Italian libraries?
4. **Role of librarians:**
 - What role do librarians play in the collaboration between comics and libraries?
5. **Role of comics:**
 - What benefits could a broader, more informed, structured collaboration between comics and libraries bring?

Additionally, this article also aims to lay the groundwork for closer cooperation among libraries, comics publishers, and institutions, with the long-term goal of fostering the creation of a network of comics libraries in Italy.

METHODOLOGY, CONTEXT, AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE SURVEY METHOD

My deep engagement with comics, both as an enthusiast and a scholar, has given me firsthand insight into the challenges surrounding their relationship with libraries, especially in Italy.

Additionally, my ongoing PhD research at Lancaster University (U.K.), focusing on the interplay between comics and data visualization in higher education, has enriched my understanding of this medium's pedagogical and educational aspects. Therefore, this article is rooted in my personal experiences and academic pursuits.

Having said that, this study employs a comprehensive approach, analyzing available sources within a broad historical framework. Among other resources used, informal conversations, e-mails, and an anonymous survey targeting librarians and other professionals in the field served the purpose of gathering unpublished and firsthand information and opinions.

The research approach related to the survey has been developed as follows:

1. Survey Development

The initial phase involved crafting a survey instrument in alignment with the research objectives. Through informal discussions with industry professionals and librarians and an analysis of available literature, questions relevant to the context of comic collections in Italian libraries were formulated. These questions, encompassing multiple-choice and open-ended formats, were organized into a questionnaire hosted on the online tool Google Forms [see Appendix].

2. Subject selection for the survey

To identify and contact respondents, I adopted several strategies:

- As a longtime enthusiast and professional in the field, some of the libraries were already known to me.
- E-mail exchanges and chats with librarians I already knew enabled me to identify other libraries.
- Online searches related to initiatives and courses on comics awareness added other possible respondents.
- I also consulted the OPAC-SBN⁴ database to identify libraries with noteworthy comics collections. Specifically, I used as a search key the code 741.5, which identifies comics in the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system. The search system automatically provided a list of libraries with substantial comics collections.⁵
- To broaden the selection, social media platforms, particularly Facebook, were utilized to share information about the research, drawing the attention of comics enthusiasts and professionals.

3. Design and Unfolding of the Survey

A targeted list of libraries was compiled, and a survey was created using Google Forms. The survey is linked to an explanatory e-mail explaining the purpose and methodology of the research. The survey covered various aspects, including the creation and cataloging of comics collections, the representation of different types or genres of comics, display and promotional strategies, and the impact of comics on library lending and public involvement. The Google form was made available for two months, then the ability to respond was terminated.

In particular, the following themes were explored:

- How the collections were created, and following which criteria, and with what funds;
- How comics were cataloged.
- What types or 'genres' are most represented in collections (with a focus on the role of nonfiction comics).
- How comics have been exhibited and promoted, and how comics have impacted the library in terms of lending and audiences.
-

Finally, librarians were asked for suggestions for improving the accessibility, usability, and circulation of comics in their library.

Nine libraries responded to the survey, two exclusively dedicated to comics. After verifying the identity of the participants, the survey was anonymized. The anonymization, which was already planned and announced, was explicitly requested by some participants when compiling responses. Respondents are here identified by progressive letters, from **A** to **I**. Not all survey participants answered all questions.

Furthermore, the information gathered during the survey formed the basis for organizing a recent conference – *Ti leggerei ovunque: fumetti, biblioteche e istituzioni*⁶ – held during the 2023 edition of the *Treviso Comic Book Festival* (Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023). It allowed different actors to discuss the topics analyzed here, providing additional data to enrich the larger picture. Seventeen, including librarians, comics makers, publishers, and trade association representatives, attended the conference. The conference was organized following three different macro-topics:

⁴ The Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) of the *Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale* (SBN, 'National Library Service') allows bibliographic searches in the collective catalog of Italian libraries.

⁵ It must be said that, as it will be seen, using the 741.5 code returns a very partial view of the comics collections within Italian libraries, as also noted by Rota (2022). Therefore, in evaluating this search, a certain degree of approximation must be taken into account.

⁶ Trad, 'I would read you anywhere: comics, libraries and institutions.' Conference held on September 30, 2023.

- Libraries and institutions.
- Libraries and publishers.
- Libraries and comics makers.

The information, opinions, and testimonies gathered through the survey and conference were then contextualized in the context of the national and international literature on the topic.

LIMITATIONS

The limited number of respondents to the survey (9) does not necessarily provide a detailed picture of the articulated presence of comics in the 7,425 public and private, state and non-state Italian open-access libraries (excluding school and university libraries) (Istat 2021).

In addition, almost all of the libraries participating in the survey are located in the center-north, with only one being in the south, which reflects the uneven distribution of libraries across the country (Istat 2021). However, their geographical distribution is more consistent with that of Italian comics shops (AIE 2022c), suggesting a connection that should be further investigated.

Some subject areas have been excluded for time and space reasons (e.g., comics digitization and digital lending management). Digital comics, in particular, is an underdeveloped market sector in Italy and Europe (AIE 2021; Eudicom 2021), although it can be assumed that its role may become more central in the years to come.

COMICS AND ITALIAN LIBRARIES: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A MEDIUM FOR CHILDREN.

I attest to the power of graphics and specifically comic graphics [sic] to illustrate and reinforce the meaning of the written and spoken word.

(Smith 2013, xi)

Due to the occasionally overstated associations between comics and children or young adults, it is crucial to explore the pedagogical perspective linked to this medium to understand its relationship with libraries in Italy.⁷

Comics have a long tradition as an educational tool, originating in Japan at the end of the 1800s (Inoue 2012; Murakami and Bryce 2009) and in the Western world – the U.S. especially – since the 1930s (Tilley, Weiner, and Robert G. 2016). Comics as pedagogical tools were originally and primarily used to support literacy and encourage traditional reading, a role often associated with them even today. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, respectively, comics began to peep into school and public reading libraries in the two countries but encountered resistance and faced attempts at purging (Graham 2016; Nyberg 2010; Hopkins 2010), which, at least in the U.S. case, continue to this day.⁸ Similar anti-comics crusades also occurred in Europe. This is the case of the *British*

⁷ It should be said that the comics-young readers pairing reflects the demographic profile of the users of Italian libraries and that of the comics reader. Regarding libraries, "the largest share of readers is observed among young people up to age 24, with the highest peaks among 11- to 14-year-olds (57.1%)" (Istat 2023), similar to what happens with comics readers tout court (AIE 2021).

⁸ Particularly in the U.S. context, comics continue to be banned from libraries. In addition to problems of acceptance related to certain sensitive topics (LGBT+ rights, racial issues, depiction of sexual abuse, etc.), this often happens because comics designed for adults are lent to children, as the whole comic book production is still considered to be aimed at them. For more details and a list of cases, see the *Comic Book Legal Defense Fund* website (<https://cbldef.org/>).

Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act of 1955⁹ and the French law of 1949¹⁰ apt to regulate publications intended for children. In Italy, bipartisan parliamentary questions and proposed regulations aimed at controlling the periodical and comics press for children culminated in 1962 publishers' adoption of a self-censorship code (De Salvia 2004). The tones of newspaper articles from those decades,¹¹ as well as the rants of some parliamentarians, especially progressives, who linked corruption, decadence, and juvenile delinquency to comics (Stancanelli 2011a; 2011b; Minelli 2016; Barberis 2021), resonate with those that led to the adoption of the well-known Comics Code in the U.S. (Wertham 1954; Hajdu 2009).

Indeed, as comics were supposed to be linked to a young readership, they were inevitably branded as childish. As della Corte notes,

the Italian has a great fear of infantilism and fears ridicule in a particular way. On streetcars, on boulevard benches, it is far easier to glimpse an adult leafing through a photo story than an adult grappling with comics. These are considered degrading because their key is blatantly that of *divertissement* (1961, 9).

Viewing comics as a means of escapism and entertainment also suited publishers, who felt that their inclusion in the school environment would undermine their appeal (Pellitteri 2008, 92).

Thus, while comics were seen as only and sometimes dangerous entertainment – primarily for children – their pedagogical function seemed to be only preparatory to reading, influencing their placement in the library context. At worst, comics were perceived not as an aid but as an obstacle to reading. Within the field literature on libraries, Camerani (1960, 81) pointed to comics as one of the causes that did not lead children to appreciate children's literature, especially Italian. Balsamo, reviewing a handbook dedicated to children's librarians (Centro didattico nazionale di studi e documentazione 1965), noted that, throughout the text,

the problem of comics in their various educational and even methodological implications is pointed out, with a conditional acquittal to a limited and supervised use, granted only a role as a brief parenthesis of entertainment (Balsamo 1966, 334).¹²

However, it was not a homogeneous point of view. Although an intellectual reappraisal of comics began in Italy as early as the early post-World War II period (Borelli 2011; Stancanelli 2015; 2008), it was starting in the 1960s that comics were widely investigated and discussed as worthy cultural objects and introduced into the ranks of the 'adult' press. Around the same time, in Italy (Pellitteri 2008) as in the U.S. (Hatfield 2005), there has been a renewed interest in comics among educators, teachers, and librarians.

Speaking specifically about public reading libraries,¹³ it was always from the 1960s onward that something began to change. For example, libraries in Bologna started introducing comics for adults and children in their collections in the 1960s. (Isituzione Biblioteche 2015). Also in

⁹ <https://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Eliz2/3-4/28>.

¹⁰ Loi n° 49-956 du 16 juillet 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000878175>).

¹¹ When comics read by younger people were mentioned in the Italian press of those years, these were often associated with decadence, low literacy, and crime. If the theme was adult readers and comics, the latter were frequently related to pornographic magazines. Headlines such as "Misery, films and American comics motives of delinquency among youth" (G. Q. 1950, 4), "[comics] glorify hatred, violence, sensuality" (D. M. 1951, 3), "The school of delinquency for the boys of our time," (Crifoni 1948, 3), "'Crime comics' and horrific juvenile crime," (Vargas 1953, 5), "The death of the book" (Monelli 1952, 3) and similar ones connecting comics to degradation and juvenile crime were widespread in Italian newspapers between the 1940s and 1960s. However, there was no shortage of dissenting or at least more moderate voices (cf., Rusconi 1946, 3; Origlia 1953, 3; Bo 1961). It is interesting to note that the quoted article by Monelli was published next to an advertisement in the form of comic strips on the same page.

¹² Attitude this one not entirely changed if still, in 1998, pedagogue, comics enthusiast, and children's literature expert Ermanno Detti (1998) placed comics among the "enemies" of reading (quoting the term, however), that is, media that promote loss of literacy.

¹³ No substantial data could be found on school libraries, which, in any case, will be ignored in this article.

Bologna, in 1964, the *Fiera del Libro per Ragazzi* ('Bologna Children's Book Fair') was inaugurated, which would prove to be fundamental for better knowledge and widespread use of the medium, although always linked to a juvenile context (T. L. 1978). Furthermore, although cautious but with less apocalyptic tones, the relationships between comics, pedagogy, and libraries started to be discussed in the generalist press, almost exclusively about children and young adults. In addition, monographs and scholarly publications on the relationship between pedagogy and comics were beginning to be published (Istituto di Pedagogia dell'Università di Roma 1967; Dallari and Farnè 1977; Aida 1978; Genovesi 1977) – and their numbers will grow significantly from the 1980s onward –, although the topic of the relationship between libraries and comics remains largely unexplored.

Only from the late 1970s onward will the latter issue begin to be discussed. This phenomenon was also aided by the expansion of the textbook concept and the school library market, which started to grow and became more attractive to publishers (T. L. 1977a; 1977b; Genta 1977). Consequently, comics started to be described in non-demonic terms, connecting the medium to then-recent pedagogical concepts such as interdisciplinarity (Genta 1977). Furthermore, the inclusion of comics in public libraries began to be hypothesized (T. L. 1978), and children's libraries were described as, for example, a possible "bridge between comics and audiovisuals" (Michelini 1979). Moreover, debate, in a fairly unprecedented way, thanks to the changed cultural context, would occasionally involve comics artists (L. R. 1981). Experiments were also emerging, such as the school library run by the pupils of Florence's Pestalozzi School, where comics were an established and well-received presence (Golzio 1977).

On the other hand, literature and handbooks for librarians to orient themselves in comics remained scarce, if not nonexistent. Aside from a bibliographic guide to comics and comics-related publications (Fossati 1980), one would have to wait until the 2000s for Italian texts explicitly devoted to comics-related topics regarding libraries, such as acquisitions, cataloging, preservation, and lending (Goria 2004; Ambu and Mander 2020).¹⁴ The same applies to specialized scientific articles and dissertations (Sferruzza 2023; Zanin-Yost 2014; Tomaino 2010).

However, what can be said about public reading libraries? Apart from a few isolated realities, mostly related to school and classroom libraries, one can start talking about 'comics libraries' properly beginning in the 1980s. As will be seen, even though, starting in the 2010s, also through the adoption of the label 'graphic novel,' some cultural distrust of comics has been overcome, 'adulthood' their enjoyment (Curcio 2016, 390), the comics-children pairing will not be easily or immediately broken.

THE BIRTH AND THE HISTORY OF THE ITALIAN COMICS LIBRARIES

In the past, there has been bad blood between the library and comics. Because the library has always, and rightly so, considered itself the custodian of knowledge, the preserver of culture, and comics, until not so long ago, has not been considered a cultural product and, even today, struggles to be equated with books.

(Cuccolini 1994, 12)

In a 1988 newspaper article entitled *Tutto è fumetto* ('Everything is Comics'), the foundation of the *Centro Fumetto Andrea Pazienza* (CFPAZ) in Cremona was announced by one of its creators,

¹⁴ In the English-speaking context, especially the U.S., related literature and manuals, while not vast, are beginning to be substantial. See, for example, (Graham 2016; R. G. Weiner 2010; Schneider 2014; Scott 1990)

Michele Ginevra (Ginevra 1988, 13). CFPAZ was and is still an institute for comics study, preservation, cataloging, dissemination, and creation, including a comics library with a loan service. The latter can be considered the first free-access comics library in Italy (Ginevra in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 14:55). In the aforementioned article, Ginevra highlighted certain specificities or challenges that continue to impact comics libraries even today. These include the reliance on volunteer efforts from fans, self-funding initiatives, challenges in securing financial support, and the ongoing necessity for donations of comics.

Some years before, between 1983 and 1985, the association from which CFPAZ was later born was asked to organize an itinerant comics exhibition by the local municipal library (Ginevra in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 11:22), which had a meager collection of senescent comics (Ginevra 1994). Subsequently highlighting the long-lasting distrust of libraries toward comics, Ginevra described how the library director censored some of the selected comics for the exhibition due to the presence of nudity and "inappropriate content." In his opinion, that was the sign of a mindset that associated comics only with children and teenage readers (Ginevra in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 12:00).

As Cuccolini stated, around the mid-1990s, things started to change regarding the relationship between comics and libraries, although the author does not fail to replicate the binomials comics and children, and comics and popular culture (1994). Specifically, in the 1990s,

there has been a rapprochement between library and comics to the point that in many libraries, mainly municipal and neighborhood libraries, there is often no lack of a section dedicated to comics and, for the most part, reserved for young readers. This is a very valid initiative because it serves to draw young people into the orbit of the library system and, thus, to bring them closer to the book, showing them that culture is a great integrated system that, like the spool of the loom, moves incessantly between the high and the low, the academic and the popular thus weaving complex and, often, inextricable plots and warps (Ibid, 12).

Cuccolini emphasized the persistent subordinate role of comics to the book, within a low-high opposition in which the comics serve primarily as an introduction to reading. Following Ginevra and Cuccolini, the infantilization of the medium continued through the decades, as does its alleged role as a viaticum for serious reading. This is in keeping with what Maini said in an article titled *One Hundred Years of Comics Still Not Enough: The Difficult Relationship between Libraries and a Genre Discriminated Against by "High Culture"*¹⁵ (1995). The author pointed out how comics play an instrumental role in municipal public reading libraries,

attracting young readers in the hope that sooner or later, they will shift their attention to the 'real' book. These are mostly episodic collections, with no coherence, few titles, and no supporting tools in the belief that they are easy, whereas it is a complex phenomenon whose reading and understanding require different knowledge (Ibid, 9).

Going back to the evolution of the comics-libraries relationship, a pivotal moment, particularly concerning children's literature, occurred with the establishment of the Hamelin Cultural Association in Bologna. This association, engaged in reading education since 1996, has actively embraced various forms of storytelling, including books, comics, and illustrations, often fostering collaborations with entities such as libraries.

Emphasizing the continual rise in library enthusiasm for comics and the enduring notion of the medium predominantly catering to children, one can observe the development of specialized courses designed specifically for librarians and educators. The website of the *Associazione Italiana Biblioteche* (AIB, 'Italian Library Association') features numerous offerings, including courses, seminars, and conferences dedicated to comics. However, these initiatives predominantly center around a young audience, encompassing children and young adults, with a frequent emphasis on

¹⁵ Original title: *Cent'anni di fumetti non bastano ancora. Il difficile rapporto tra le biblioteche e un genere discriminato dalla "cultura alta"*

school libraries. Examples include courses such as "Reading Children's Books. Training Course for Librarians and Educators" (2020)¹⁶ or "Growing up by Reading" (2015),¹⁷ where the subject of comics is regularly incorporated. It is worth noting that many of these courses demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the medium, its specific characteristics, and the associated challenges, particularly in addressing common perceptions and misconceptions. For example, the scarce knowledge of the medium is highlighted, and changes in the publishing market and exhibition and administrative problems¹⁸ and not-so-new trends, such as manga, are explored.¹⁹ It should also be said that, on the other hand, there is no lack of courses with a broader and more adult-oriented approach (Tosti 2016, 643), even though the risk of infantilization or, at least of a nostalgic approach seems to be always in the background.

Coming back to Cuccolini's paper (1994) – now almost thirty years old – which offers some inspiring insights that are a valid agenda today:

- The need to equip libraries not only with good comics but also with specialized and multidisciplinary books on comics.
- The need to train librarians on this specific type of product.
- The need to organize presentations, exhibitions, and initiatives, also in collaboration with the comics artists themselves, in order to "raise the reader's awareness and make him more critically aware" (Ibid, 12).
- The need to establish, alongside libraries open to the public and available for lending, centers for documenting, preserving, and studying this medium. These centers would also house the related critical apparatus, right down to more volatile products such as fanzines, which "reveal orientations of taste and offer data otherwise not readily available" (Ibid, 13).

The author also proposed a national investment plan for comics library collections, involving the state, local authorities, and publishers and encouraging collaboration through donations. This approach is deemed more appropriate due to the high costs involved – comics are expensive – and the need for efficient collection management.

Although comics collections already existed in Italian libraries – as in the Bologna mentioned above case – the creation of the CFPaz library sets a precedent, followed, for example, by such entities as the *Biblioteca delle Nuove* (Perugia), which opened in 2002, and *BIFF – Biblio Farandola*, which opened in Rome in 2006. However, it must be said that making a list of proper comics libraries and distinguishing them from generalist ones with substantial comics collections is not easy. Searching in the library section of the OPAC-SBN²⁰ using 'fumetto' and 'fumetti' as keywords yielded 14 results, distributed between northern – mainly – and central Italy. Only one of these – the *BIFF – Biblio Farandola* library in Rome, is a library explicitly devoted to comics, while, among the others, two are libraries for children. Not all Italian comics libraries are archived in the OPAC-SBN or identifiable through these search keys. For example, CFPaz's albeit substantial collections are searchable on the OPAC-SBN of Cremona and Brescia Library Network.

In short, even stating that "comics are no small part of the publishing universe and library collections" (Sferruzza 2023, 297), navigating this world is complex. Indeed, "Although prejudices about the dignity of comics publications have been overcome, the place of comics in libraries is still uncertain and enjoyment hindered, not least by the quality of their cataloging" (Ibid, 298).

At least as early as the mid-1990s, the problem of cataloging comics had been highlighted in the Italian context (Cuccolini 1994, 13; Dumontet 1995). Notably, "comics present considerable

¹⁶ <https://www.aib.it/corsi/leggiamo-i-libri-per-ragazzi-corso-di-formazione-per-bibliotecari-ed-educatori/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.aib.it/corsi/leggi-cresci-4-giornata-regionale-di-formazione>.

¹⁸ <https://www.aib.it/corsi/leggiamo-i-libri-per-ragazzi-corso-di-formazione-per-bibliotecari-ed-educatori/>.

¹⁹ <https://www.aib.it/corsi/manga-in-biblioteca-2-0/>.

²⁰ The online public access catalog of the Italian national library service system.

problems [of cataloging] because they constitute a very fluid material, subject to frequent changes that can make their cataloging rather problematic" (Dumontet 1995, 12). As will be seen, the problem concerning comics cataloging is also reflected in identifying 'comics' libraries.

CATALOGING CRITERIA AND COMICS COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT

The difficulty above regarding the acquisition, cataloging, and managing of comics (Graham 2016, 402–3) has been a much-discussed issue internationally in the past decades, at least since pioneer Randall W. Scott attested in 1978 that "the Library of Congress, which catalogs 'everything,' has cataloged only one comic book in the 45 or so years of comic books" (1978, 4).

For example, it has been said that "Comics can be very tricky for librarians" (Phoenix 2020, 213) because of their 'subversive' and anarchic nature, involving both aspects of the genre, publishing formats, and papercraft particularities, not least because "traditionally, the work of comics is associated with its physical medium" (Guilbert 2015, 2). Consequently, rather than 'comics,' it would be better to speak, as Berthou did, of "all the books that make up this whole that we call comics" (2015, 3). It is also necessary to consider how the way comics are named and labeled affects their perception and, consequently, the practices related to their cataloging (Goldsmith 2010). In fact, comics, by the multitude of their publishing formats (Couch 2000; Lefèvre 2000), dependent also on their geographic origin, present specific cataloging and display problems (Heaney 2007; Falk and Hunker 2010). This is a particularly noticeable problem considering comics series spread over several volumes.²¹

Some typical comics stories include complex multiverses, open and interwoven narratives, often in the context of serial publications.²² Publishing a story or story arc can take years, if not decades, involving a main title and others (spin-offs, tie-ins, etc.). Consequently, various problems arise regarding acquisition, cataloging, storage, and lending, especially if the quality is poor or volumes or albums are not adequately preserved (Degener 2022). In addition, the tight budgets of libraries and the still high costs of comics represent a further difficulty related to collection management (Lo et al. 2019; Culbertson and Jackson 2016).

Moreover, comics typically bear the International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) identifier, according to the Grand Comics Database,²³ which "is used to identify some series but does not identify specific issues (generally the ISSN is used in conjunction with a publication date)" (GCD n.d.). In contrast, graphic novels are distinguished by the International Standard Book Number (ISBN), typically reserved for books and intended for a "monographic publication: text that stands on its own as a product, whether printed, audio or electronic" (ALA 2022).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the book format, often marketed as a 'graphic novel,' provides a practical solution to various issues, offering a more standardized 'container' akin to those commonly used by libraries. Additionally, it proves to be a physically more robust and, above all, space-efficient option, bringing benefits to classification and loan management compared, for example, to the more fragile comic book format. Graphic novels have become so prominent in library collections (Goldsmith 2005). However,

the term 'graphic novel' is universally [sic] applied in public libraries, even if the term is not necessarily always used correctly [...] A library comics collection that only includes what are culturally deemed as acceptable and

²¹ Think that the 104 volumes (more than 20,000 pages) that compose *One Piece*, one of the most popular manga series of all time – still ongoing – reach almost two meters when placed side by side. To give another example, *Tex*, one of the most famous and long-standing Italian comics, has gone 2200 issues.

²² In this regard, see Réveillac (2011, 24–25). Specifically concerning series, they specify that "a significant portion of budgets is [...] spent on following the series: most libraries try to conclude a series that has already begun systematically. This ends up creating problems because, for many series, the number of volumes is not determined" (Ibid, 24).

²³ It is "a nonprofit, Internet-based organization of international volunteers dedicated to building a database covering all printed comics throughout the world" (GCD n.d.).

serious graphic novels is limiting in terms of readership and access, excluding readers who engage with other comics formats (Vitella 2020, 72–73).

While the 'graphic novel' format, often compiling previously serialized narratives in volumes (like 'omnibus editions'), offers straightforward cataloging, display, and preservation advantages, it is crucial to recognize that a library's purpose extends beyond preserving and providing access to 'stories.' It encompasses safeguarding historical, cultural, and editorial memory, including publishing formats, printing specifics, and paratextual elements (such as advertisements, editorials, and letter columns, typically purged in volume collections).

The hybrid nature of comics and the – albeit attenuated today – perception of 'children's stuff' also entail other problematic issues. As Hartman notes, librarians must ask themselves constant questions related to "Where do we park graphic novels? In the teen collection? Children's Library? Adult non-fiction graphic arts? Adult fiction?" (2010, 52). Specifically concerning cataloging, it is essential to note that, for example, many studies on literacy and comics often do not clearly distinguish between comics and any other visual-narrative medium or genre, such as comic strips, cartoons, or illustrations. The DDC system is the most widely used library classification system internationally – and in Italy – and its categories and classes reflect the above terminological and methodological confusion. Following the DDC's rules, comics have been included,

- In class 700 (Arts and recreation),
- In the section 740 (Graphic arts and decorative arts),
- In the subsection 741 (Drawing and drawings),
- In the sub-subsection 741.5 (Comic books, graphic novels, fotonovelas, cartoons, caricatures, comic strips).

In addition, there are other subdivisions (e.g., 741.59) concerning the country of origin of the work following the origin of the primary author (Beall 2005), although many comics (e.g., superhero comics) are created by artists coming from different countries.

DDC has been challenged (Sterling 2010; Goldsmith 2005, 52; Tarulli 2010) as problematic for librarians to use and, among other things because it identifies the graphic novel as a genre, not a format (Goldsmith 2010, 187). Furthermore, it lumps very different objects, such as fotonovelas and comic strips, under the same division, ignoring the extensive discussion on comics-related terminology (e.g., Labio 2011). It also makes it difficult to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction works. "It matters little whether it is a book containing a comics story or the text of an essay or the alphabetical entries of an encyclopedia on comics: it all ends up in the great cauldron of (sub)class 741.5" (Rota 2022). Particularly:

The DDC is typically used in public libraries, and yet **public librarians often find the DDC hard to maintain for graphic novels**. Librarians might use the 741.59xx number but then further catalog in several different ways. Some put them in **the comic strip section** as DDC directs, some create **a separate section similar to audio or video collections**, some **integrate the books** into fiction or appropriate non-fiction sections, and some **cross-catalog** (Sterling 2010).

In short, even in terms of library classification, the 'Comic-book conundrum' seems far from being 'Cracked,' as was too emphatically announced on *The Dewey Blog* (2006). Furthermore, very often, the classification and, consequently, the display on the shelves of comics is a matter for the initiative of individual libraries or librarians (Hartman 2010). In fact, in this case, there does not seem to be a magic wand, as the problems mentioned above are not only specific to DDC but also extend to the rigidities typical of other cataloging systems. Commenting on the eccentric cataloging work done by the San Diego State University Library, Culbertson and Jackson conclude that by "perhaps, in the breaking of the rules that we enable users to fully realize the potential of our collections" (Culbertson and Jackson 2016, 169). It must be said that eccentricity is not an exceptionality when it comes to cataloging comics. Turner notes that "the literature and study

reveals a myriad of possibilities for how to classify and organize a graphic novel collection" (2014, 47) and that "every library covered used a slightly different classification system because every library is slightly different" (Ibid., p. 48). As will be seen throughout this article, the Italian situation does not seem very different and appears to suffer from the same difficulties noted by Ciment (2007). When speaking of the French situation, they affirmed that "municipal libraries treat comics like no other document or genre: loose, unclassified, with very little critical literature."

THE ITALIAN CASE

This part collects mixed data regarding Italian cataloging specificities and issues from different sources. In particular, data from official guidelines for Italian libraries and *Anagrafe delle biblioteche italiane*²⁴ ('Italian Library Registry') and data from e-mail interviews with Dr. Laura Borsi (Head of Data Entry and Control for the Register of Italian Libraries), Dr. Egidio Incelli, (a library official at *Ministero della Cultura* ('Ministry of Culture')), Elisabetta Castro (librarian at the Ministry of Culture) have been taken into account.

Before going into detail, it is helpful to offer a brief overview of the comics market in Italy. While not reaching the production and sales volumes of the 'golden years' – the 1960s and 1970s – (Curcio 2016, 389), the Italian comics market has shown significant growth in recent years. It is challenging to get precise information about the comics market in Italy. Also, due to the sharp drop in comics sales over the past 20 years, publishers seldom provide sales data, and data about sales in comics shops, online, and at festivals are virtually nonexistent (Dallavalle 2020; Fondazione Symbola 2022, 208; Curcio 2016, 390). Likewise, data on the circulation of comics in libraries, excluding sporadic reports, are almost totally lacking. Nevertheless, it is possible to refer to some estimates.

Following the *Associazione Italiana Editori* ('Italian Publishers Association', AIE), in 2021, 33,078 comics were published in Italy, of which 3,272 were new, with a respective increase of +19.1% and +5.8% compared to 2020 and +3.9% and +9.8% compared to 2019. Compared to fiction, which grew by +45.5% between 2000 and 2021, comics grew by +976.3%. This growth, especially in recent years, was led by manga (1521 titles in 2021) and graphic novels (604 titles in 2021), generating a purchase expenditure of EUR 24.8 million in 2021, corresponding to a market share of 5.4% (AIE 2022a). Comics readers in Italy are almost 9 million, i.e., 18% of the national population and 35% of book readers (AIE 2021). Although as far as the general book market is concerned, the first 11 months of 2022 showed a decline compared to the previous year (-2% in copies sold and -2.3% in value), comics sales increased by 15.9% in value sales (AIE 2022d).

In addition, comics frequently top the best-selling book charts, and some works and authors – such as Gipi, Zerocalcare, Fumettibrutti, etc. – have firmly entered the national cultural debate. Within this albeit comforting background, the continuing trend of cuts in funding and support plagues the whole library sector (Rainews 2015; Favasuli 2013; Stella 2020; Meloni 2013; ANSA 2023; Libraio 2023; Frigimelica and Parise, 2012).

In short, although comics are increasingly culturally and commercially relevant, the precarious economic situation of the library system and the systematic lack of staff²⁵ make it difficult for them to have a more relevant presence in libraries. Moreover, figuring out how many comics there are in Italian libraries is not easy, and this difficulty is linked to the specific problems related to their cataloging.

²⁴ <https://anagrafe.iccu.sbn.it/it/>

²⁵ According to Istat's 2019 survey, 39.7% of total libraries are staffed entirely by volunteer and unpaid staff, and four out of 10 library staff (39.2%) work part-time (Istat 2021).

Summarizing a document outlining the cataloging rules for Italian libraries (*Regole Italiane di Catalogazione*, commonly known as REICAT)²⁶ reads, in section 18.5.1 (p. 546) and others, that comics or, instead, their visual component cannot be considered for all intents and purposes on par with an illustration because the latter is a constituent part of the work being cataloged.²⁷

However, in the case of several authors, their contributions must be indicated separately but always within the framework of cataloging that considers them creators of a work exclusively to the graphic arts. A collaboration that results in a unitary work for which the choice of the term 'illustration' is particularly jarring. However, these classification criteria, as well as others, are debated. For example, in a document promoted by the libraries of the municipality of Modena and compiled by, among others, two librarians, it is stated that,

"Comics is not a genre! It is a language!" the experts keep repeating to the librarians [...] used to reasoning in genres and classes. [DDC considers comics] an artistic category [...], thus wholly neglecting the other aspect, the literary one. Hence, the starting misunderstanding that makes it so challenging to place comics in libraries: when we say that it is a genre, we actually mean that [...] it should be classified among literature [...]. While it is true that considering it a narrative genre is limiting [...], it is also true that considering it merely a drawing, albeit an artistic one, loses its function of literary expression (Furini, Rimondini, and Spiritelli 2012).

As much as even placing prominence on the 'literariness' of comics betrays the nature and history of the medium, it is clear that even a classification that reduces them to just one form of graphic art, among others, does not serve to frame it usefully. In such a context, where comics, at least in traditional libraries, are considered a secondary 'genre,' it is unsurprising that there are still very few libraries and institutions with a substantial comics section.

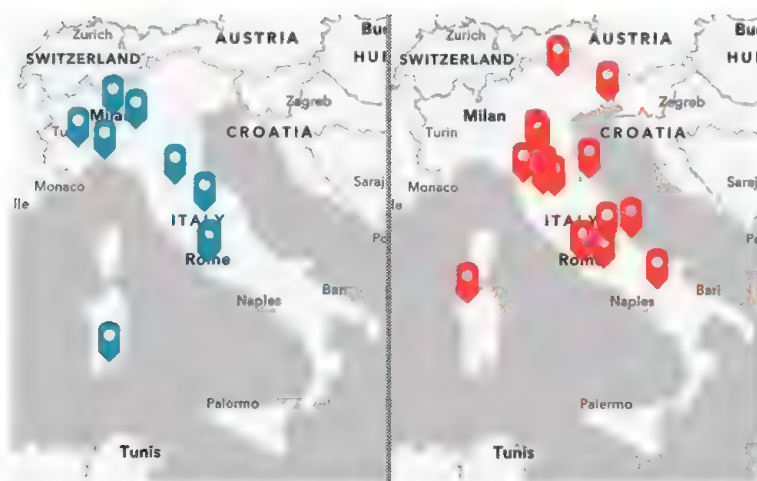


FIG. 1

Geographical distribution of libraries identified through the Italian Library Registry. On the left (blue) are those identified through the query '741.5'. On the right (red), are those identified through the query 'fumetti.'

Searching the *Anagrafe delle Biblioteche Italiane* ('Italian Library Registry') website²⁸ and using the code 741.5, it turns out that only eight libraries are 'specialized' in comics (out of 12963 libraries surveyed), of which seven are located in central and northern Italy.

By redoing the search using the keyword 'fumetti' ('comics'), the libraries – without distinction between public libraries, university libraries, etc. – become nineteen (of which one no longer exists). Of these, 1 is the library of a fine arts academy, 1 is a regional library, and 15 are public municipal libraries (2 of which are children's libraries). The only

proper comics library – the *BIFF – Biblio Farandola Fumetto* (Rome) – is run by a cultural association. To find other comics libraries, one must refer again to the query with search key 741.5.

²⁶ The REICAT is in line with the rules provided by the ISBD (International Standard Bibliographic Description), even departing from them on points not deemed in line with the Italian bibliographic tradition.

²⁷ (Commissione permanente per la revisione delle regole italiane di catalogazione 2009), The document is drawn up by the *Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico* ('Central Institute for the Unique Catalogue'), <https://www.iccu.sbn.it/export/sites/iccu/documenti/2015/REICAT-giugno2009.pdf>.

²⁸ <https://anagrafe.iccu.sbn.it/it/>.

Of the 9 libraries found, 8 are administered by private entities or associations, except for the *Biblioteca delle Nuvole*, pertaining to the municipality of Perugia [Fig. 1].

Most of the libraries identified are located in central and northern Italy, partially reflecting the most overall uneven distribution of libraries across the country [Fig. 2].²⁹ Furthermore, the distribution of libraries in Italy is erratic between large and peripheral cities, as seen in the following map [Fig.2 (Giunti 2022)].

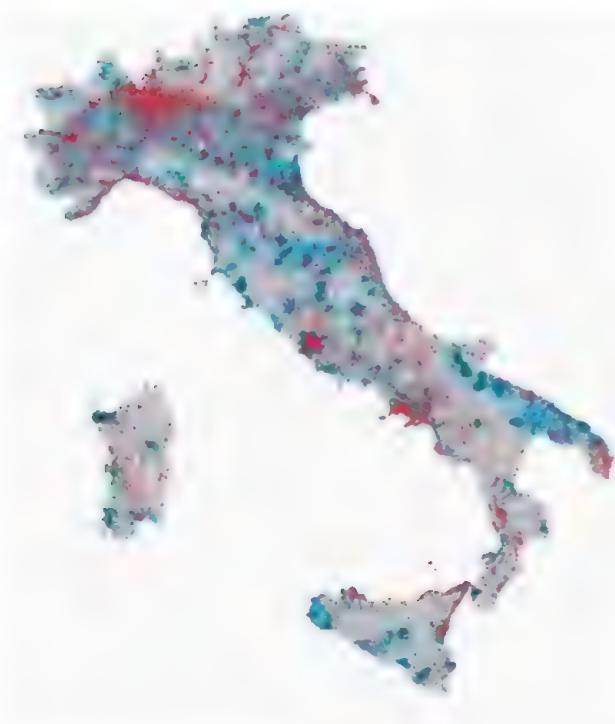


FIG. 2

"Every red dot on the map is an Italian library. The color of the territories, on the other hand, identifies the classification according to inland areas."

"When considering all the libraries in the national register, 10% (1,883 out of over 18,000 total) are located in peripheral and outermost municipalities. The figure rises to 17.1% if only libraries classified as public and non-specialized are considered."

Source: elaboration by openpolis – *Con i Bambini* on data from the *Agenzia per la coesione territoriale* and Iccu-Abi.

(<https://www.openpolis.it/numeri/meno-del-20-delle-biblioteche-si-trovano-nei-comuni-periferici-e-ultraperiferici/>)

Both Dr. Laura Borsi, Head of Data Entry and Control for the Italian Library Registry, and Dr. Egidio Incelli, a library official at the Ministry of Culture, confirmed by e-mail that it is complicated, if not impossible, to trace libraries that deal specifically with comics as well as comics lending statistics on a national level.³⁰

Not even the Network for Inter-Library Document Exchange ('NILDE'), the other major national ILL/DD (Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery) system besides OPAC-SBN allows such data. Regarding the presence of comics in the national library catalog, the OPAC-SBN has been consulted through restricted searches. The first narrowed the field to the DDC classification, entering 741.5 as the search key. This search resulted in 6,342 physical and 22 digital documents (plus or minus 0.3% of all materials classified on OPAC-SBN), some of which are located in foreign libraries (e.g., Paris, Brussels, and others), while others were found to be cataloged as 'resource to be projected or video.' In addition to being inaccurate, the search through the 741.5 returned a limited number of results. For example, the *Biblioteca delle Nuvole* in Perugia, which does not use this classification system and declares to have a comics collection of about 60,000 titles, of which 5,000 are cataloged (*Biblioteca delle Nuvole* n.d.), turns out to have only 560

²⁹ "More than half of the libraries are in the North (58.3%), 24.2% in the South, and 17.5% in Central Italy" (Istat 2021).

³⁰ This is not a problem related only to comics. As Galluzzi stated in 2014, data on public libraries, for example, regarding membership, lending, and performance, are scarce, and, even, "it is hard to even know for sure the number and location of existing public libraries." (2014, 287).

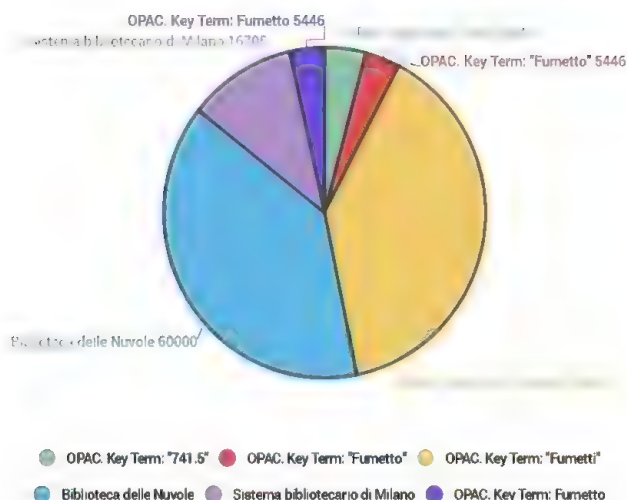


FIG. 3

available through OPAC-SBN. The search was then repeated using simple text keywords. For 'fumetto,' the results were 5,446 physical and 33 digital documents. Using the plural ('fumetti'), the results were 60,462 physical and 250 digital documents. The latter is a more realistic result, considering that the Milan Library System, on OPAC-SBN, turns out to have 11,123 physical comics, while those directly declared by the same system are 16,705³¹ (Sistema Bibliotecario di Milano 2022) [see Fig.3].

In this somewhat confusing and certainly unstructured context, the establishment of a technical committee on Italian comics by the Ministry of Culture in 2020 (Lo

Spazio Bianco 2020) has been perceived as an important signal. Its purpose is, among others, to create a national library hub for comics with its cataloging system. The work of the ministerial committee was divided into two groups. The first group, which is responsible for drafting guidelines on the cataloging of comics, focuses in particular on the following problems:

- The order of preference of sources: based on which criteria to obtain information from the covers and title pages of comics.
- Responsibility: i.e., which authorial and professional figures can be indicated as authors of publications, especially in the presence of works with numerous artistic contributions.
- Level: it is not always possible to determine whether a document can be categorized as a monograph or serial. Many serials, classified as such as periodicals, are actually monograph series.

The second group discusses the criteria to be followed for census funds and collections dedicated to comics in Italian libraries. Attention is also being paid to those collections, mainly due to private initiatives that have led to the establishment or creation of museums and specialized centers.³² In addition, the *Promozione fumetto 2021* ('Comics promotion 2021'), the first ministerial announcement to promote comics, which is also open to public institutions – thus also libraries – dates back to 2021. The technical table has not yet produced results, and *Promozione Fumetto* has not been renewed.

Beyond that, data is needed on how the presence of comics in Italian libraries affects lending and users' demographic profiles. An exception is a recent report produced by the municipality of Milan, *Big Bang! Fumetti in Biblioteca*, which profiles this phenomenon within the Milan Library System. Considering what has been said about the perception of comics as 'child's stuff,' it might be surprising that most (11,976) of the previously mentioned 16,705 comics are classified as 'for

³¹ 16,705 comics are available for loan, plus 170 for consultation, for a total of 16,875 comics. They are about 1.2 percent of the 1,400,000 volumes hosted by the system.

³² Information on the two working groups related to the Ministry's technical committee was provided by Dr. Elisabetta Castro, also head of the first group mentioned here.

adults.' Regarding age, the groups most interested in borrowing comics fall into the 18-70 age range – on a scale ranging from 0 to +70 years old – with peaks between 35 and 55. From 2017 to 2022, the majority of borrowers were women. Since 2019, the circulation of comics has increased:

In 2019, comics constituted 2.63% of the non-fiction collection and 7.40% of loans, with a circulation index of 1.7 (equal to fiction, slightly higher than guidebooks). In 2021, comics constituted 5.16% of the non-fiction collection and 9.86% of loans, with a circulation index of 1.1, much higher than any other non-fiction class (Sistema Bibliotecario di Milano 2022).

Beyond the partial picture provided by the Milan Library System, encouraging as it is, an overall one at the national level is still lacking.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

In this part, the data listed so far will be supplemented with those inferred from the above surveys and the Treviso conference.

NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE COLLECTION

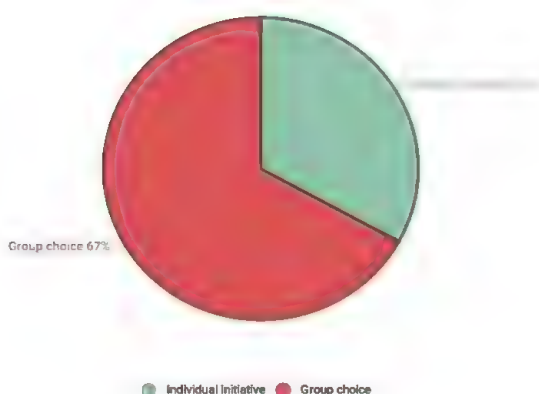


FIG. 4

Was your collection created due to an individual's initiative, or was it the result of a group's choices?

The first section of the survey focused on the creation of the collection. As can be seen from the graph in Fig. 4, creating a library comics collection is most often the result of the initiative of more people (9 responses from nine participants).

Less than half of the respondents (44%) also said they had consulted other libraries or institutions involved in comics dissemination before starting their collection. Regarding the percentage devoted to comics purchases relative to the overall budget, comics libraries must be excluded among the participants. The remaining participants indicated percentages ranging from 2% to 40%. One of the

respondents (C), who indicates a percentage of 20%, specified that this was an exceptionality related to ministerial funds. Compared with books, the higher costs of comics affect acquisition policies not at all or only moderately. The channels through which comics are acquired are eclectic: traditional bookstores, comics shops, newsstands, book distributors, and direct purchases from publishers. H specifies that comics are acquired through "a general distributor for the entire [book] estate and a preferred channel with a specialized distributor in a small part."

One of the two comics libraries (D) specifies that it had taken advantage of the *Decreto Franceschini* in the past two years.³³ Regarding the mode of supply, it stated that.

- The library receives comics due to *diritto di stampa* ('right to print')³⁴ from a large comics book publisher based in the same municipality.

³³ The so-called *Decreto Franceschini* is a fund promoted by former Culture Minister Dario Franceschini, which allocated 30 million euros to libraries open to the public to purchase books (including comics). Funding was renewed from 2020 to 2023 (MIC 2021).

³⁴ <https://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/041061.htm>. The *diritto di stampa* or, later, *deposito legale* ('legal deposit') is a legal obligation to deposit products of cultural and public interest (books, other printed texts, and other media) in libraries, archives, and other institutions for preservation and dissemination. This obligation is not always fulfilled and leads to conflicts concerning copyright enforcement. (De Robbio 2007).

- Librarians, members of a local comics association, and library users themselves donate their comics after reading them.
- The library's founder and director purchases comics monthly using personal funds.

Donations from private citizens or associations are an additional and relevant source of supply for all respondents, 56.6% of whom said that (also) the publishers themselves are donors. Regarding how the librarians select which comics to buy, all answered through websites, excluding other proposed possibilities (associations, book clubs, institutional sites).³⁵ The other options may, therefore, be missing or unknown to librarians.

However, there are also different strategies. Silleni – manager of the library Zara – explains that the Milan Library System has librarians independently choosing what to buy but coordinating through a working group on comics, consisting of at least one representative from each of the 26 libraries of the network. Initially started by librarians who were passionate about comics, through the years, the value of the medium within the library system has been recognized, so much so that, as of 2022, a portion of the budget of each library (5% to 20%) has been dedicated exclusively to the purchase of comics. Furthermore, through public calls, the Milan Library System collaborates with external entities that can handle special projects. For example, the acquisition of self-publishing or fanzines – which are not included in the catalogs of book distributors through which libraries usually obtain their supplies – is handled by an external association (Silleni in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 43:50). As for the choice of comics, again in the Milan libraries, the adult comics present in the most copies but also the most lent correspond to great international (such as *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi or *Maus* by Art Spiegelman) or national successes (e.g., Zerocalcare's comics). On the other hand, children's comics featured in multiple copies do not necessarily correspond to bestsellers, while the ranking of the most lent and best-selling children's comics turn out to be more closely matched (Sistema Bibliotecario di Milano 2022).

For example, in the ranking of the most borrowed children's comics in 2019, the world-renowned author Raina Telgemeier's books occupy first and third place but only seventh in that of comics featured in multiple copies (25 copies): this can be linked to the promotional efforts made by librarians and, in particular, to a scholar reading incentive contest such as *OssiBOOKi* (Silleni in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 55:20).

Striking a balance between one idea of a library that meets the general public's tastes and another that allows or encourages the discovery of new things (in other words, bestsellers vs. niche works) is not easy. In particular, the latter involves mediation on the part of librarians, stemming from an accurate knowledge of the medium, which is not always possible to take for granted. Furthermore, buying the most popular comics risks running out of budget, and – although detailed data on circulation and lending are lacking – so is shelf space (Réveillac 2011, 26–28). However, the – relative – independence of librarians from the market can mean that libraries can be both an exciting business sector for smaller publishers to explore and an effective professional and retention channel for readers, especially younger ones. In short, increasing donations to libraries could be a good investment for the comics publishers' present and future.

CATALOGING: CRITERIA AND CRITICALITIES

Before delving into this section, it should be specified that comics collections also include author's magazines, periodicals, correspondences, press review folders, postcards, brochures, etc., maybe partly due to inaccurate cataloging systems. This amount of often non-inventoried material should be cataloged because the history of Italian comics could be reconstructed there (Ginevra in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 24:00). Indeed, the world of comics is diverse. The

³⁵ One of the librarians (F) autonomously specified that the selection is conducted due to a personal and direct awareness of the sector.

activities of libraries should reflect this, also dealing with the promotion, preservation, and ensuring availability of comics for study and research functions as well as reading and entertainment.

As seen, cataloging represents one of the most critical aspects of managing comics in a library. Following the survey participants, there are several guidelines adopted. For example, **A** adopts cataloging that distinguishes between children's, adult, and manga comics; **B** and **G** adhere to ISBD and REICAT. **D** states that,

Comics volumes and periods are sorted by series and publishing houses; essays and monographs are sorted by themes, creating sections (ARTISTS section, ESSAYS section in turn divided into subsections such as COMICS / ILLUSTRATION / CINEMA / EDUCATION / MISCELLANY).

C, **E**, and **H** use the Dewey code, although this seems problematic. When asked, "Do you think the DDC is suitable for the medium's specificities?" 6 out of nine participants said no. The participants' individual opinions [table below] reflect the international concerns about DDC previously reported.

A	"The children's and adult division is not precise (all manga, for example, is cataloged for adults), which does not facilitate libraries where librarians are unfamiliar with this medium. Also, no subsection is based on nationalities or genres, creating confusion for users and shelf order."
D	"With the DEWEY code, comics would only have one section because, in the DEWEY code, comics is considered a genre (on the same level as science fiction)."
E	"For Dewey, comics volumes, biographies, essays, and encyclopedias have the same classification."
F	"The code reflects the Western culture of a century ago, and many categories need to be revised."
H	"A classification by genre might be more appropriate."

However, **C** stated that "the DDC is adequate, but to meet the readers, it is better also to use additional signage to help them find their way around" and that "unlike other libraries, we try to be more specific: not only the generic 741.5, but we indicate the nationality [through sub-categories] 741.5945, 741.5952, etc.,"

Suppose no one cataloging method seems to meet all the needs of libraries and the problems posed by comics. In that case, it must also be said that DDC is indispensable for public reading libraries, as it is the most widely used bibliographic organization system in Italian libraries. However, it is possible to constitute a section within which, while staying within category 741.5, a functional placement can be articulated for comics. In short, a creative, adaptive, and elastic approach seems best, as Tarulli (2010) also suggested.

For example, the CFP AZ does not follow DDC but divides its collection of 60,000 thousand volumes into,

- Monographs.
- Periodicals.
- Series.

The three groups are, in turn, divided by publisher and by format. This choice is guided by visual pleasantness and ease of retrieval (Ginevra in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 24:10).

Referring to **H**'s response regarding genre classification, these also seem quite varied within comics collections. However, many (**A**, **B**, **D**, **E**) emphasize the non-prevalence of a specific genre. **A** specifically speaks of heterogeneity. **B**, specifying that there is no main genre in the collection, mentions comics adaptations of literary classics, biographies, and superheroes. **C** emphasizes the significant presence of Bonelli, perhaps the largest and one of the older publishers of Italian popular

comics.³⁶ **D** lists superheroes, science fiction, westerns, graphic novels, memoirs, journalism, and biographies. **H** mentions graphic journalism and noir, while **I** mentions the adventure, fantasy, and graphic journalism genres. In addition, 55.6% of participants specify that they have a comics non-fiction section.

DISPLAYING

The 85,7% of the libraries surveyed – with the exclusion of the two that exclusively manage comics collections – display comics in a separate section. For example, **A** has dedicated two shelves to display new comics, one dedicated to manga and one for other comics. **B** placed the comics collection in the young adult section of the open-shelf children's Room. Furthermore, comics "are displayed alphabetically by the author but are not distinguished by genre. Users can choose for themselves." While the prevalence is the open-shelf display, often explicitly following DDC (**C** and **E**), only one (**I**) claims to display comics by sorting them by format. The format of comics volumes, significantly if oversized, poses specific problems related to display management for 55.6% of respondents. In particular, these tend to be damaged and be more prone to wear and tear (**B** and **C**), while some particular formats – the specific case of Joe Sacco's *The Great War*³⁷ (**D**) – are reserved only for internal consultation (**C**, **D**, and **E**). Only **G** emphasizes how non-standard formats are more liked by users.

Following **D**, non-standard formats also prevent the display of comics among others from the same publisher (posing a problem for those who opt for this type of classification/display). This choice sometimes forces the display of comics by showing the cover board rather than the spine, taking up more space (**C**). However, "the small pocket format is difficult to handle" for **D** "because there is the risk of theft." In conclusion, the uneven graphic novel format still seems to be a winner, as "book-sized volumes with titles on the spine are easier to manage and better recognized by users" (**G**).³⁸

LOANS AND AUDIENCE

While Silleni notes that "the circulation index of comics is very high" (in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 43:20), survey participants provided more diverse responses.

Excluding the two comics libraries, 5 out of 7 participants noticed an increase in lending and circulation after the introduction of comics in their collections. Specifically, 55.6% noted an increase in user circulation lending, both in number and type of users. **A** cannot precisely quantify the percentage increase since the establishment of a comics section is recent. However, the collection consisting of 750 titles is consistently 30/40% on loan. On the other hand, **C** states that the percentage increase is between 15% and 20%. When the expansion is factual, it is related – according to one librarian's statement – to titles by authors born on and/or active on the web (**H**), due probably to their popularity. In only one case, one of the surveyed entities does not lend the titles in the comics section.

The increase in readership is mainly related to a specific age group (namely the 12-18 age group) (**A** and **C**) who previously did not attend the library (**A**). Only two of the survey respondents (**B** and **H**) record no change in readership, while **F** points out a steady increase in female readers. However, according to **G**, the audience borrowing comics is across the board, including "school-age children, college students, comics enthusiasts, illustration professionals" (**I**). The main attractor of

³⁶ Bonelli is the publisher of such titles as *Tex*, *Dylan Dog*, *Zagor*, and *Martin Mystère*.

³⁷ This book is tangential to comics in both format and intention. Joe Sacco's work is a 7-meter sequential image in a concertina-opening format. The fragility of the volume prompted the interviewed library to exclude it from lending, as is often the case for delicate or valuable books.

³⁸ Regarding the perception of comic formats, it is worth recalling what Valentina De Poli, former editor-in-chief of Disney's hugely popular *Topolino* magazine, said: "Kids lost the concept of the periodical magazine [...] many treated the magazine like a book, they were surprised that there was an advertisement at the end and not the back cover" (Allegri 2018).

the teenage group is manga, while classic Italian comics – such as the Bonelli comics, as mentioned earlier – have a significantly higher age elective audience in the 45/60 range (C). This is not confirmed in the Milan Library System report. In fact, among the most borrowed volumes by adults are mainly national and international bestsellers. For example, comics by Zerocalcare – one of Italy's top authors – occupy the top eight positions of loans. In contrast, the ranking for children is more diverse and uneven (Sistema Bibliotecario di Milano 2022). However, making comics that are thought to be intended for a specific age group accessible to everyone can create surprises. Although Bonelli Publishing House's *Tex* (1948 - ongoing) is read primarily by older readers, it is sometimes enjoyed by children, often through the intermediary of grandparents (Aiudi in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 6:33:22; Ginevra in 2023 6:35:36).

Creating a collection of comics usually generates positive effect feedback, with limited mistrustful attitudes from "some strong readers of the older generation" who "criticized comics as being a minor genre" (B). After all, as stated by C, "non-comics fans tend to change their minds with difficulty." Libraries seem to fail to shake the idea that comics are just entertainment. When asked how comics are perceived by their audience, 57.1% answered "as something 'serious,'" while 42.9% "only as entertainment and amusement."

COMMUNICATION AND EVENT PLANNING

Consequent to what has just been said, how comics are communicated and disseminated gains central relevance. For Ginevra (in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 15:47), the library activity is instrumental for all the other activities, such as presentations, exhibitions, and critical works.

The promotion of comic-centered events is substantial to a consistent collection. The survey reveals that 66% of the libraries surveyed organize initiatives to raise public awareness of the medium. In addition, 55% of respondents use comics to create educational paths related to science or issues of a social or environmental nature or related to the local community's history. In addition, for most participants (88.9% of eight respondents), broadening and diversifying the target audience is crucial. This goal can be achieved by expanding and diversifying the collection (A, B, and C), but also by conducting events (B, C, D, E, F, H, and I), including in collaboration with schools (F). Libraries collaborate with institutional and associative realities in the area, especially with educational institutions, through workshops in which material and bibliographic selections designed *ad hoc* are offered. Mainly, the following activities were highlighted:

- Book presentations.
- Drawing courses.
- Exhibitions.
- Meetings with authors.

In addition, future planning contemplates events such as exhibitions, lectures, life drawing sessions, and festivals. These events could increase awareness of the medium, promote reading, and convey a more diverse and numerically more extensive user base to libraries. However, the preferred user always seems to be the school-age one (5 of 8 respondents), as in the case mentioned above of *OssiBOOki* and other similar initiatives across the country.³⁹ This is also reflected in the already mentioned AIB training courses focused on younger readers.

The survey participants agreed that targeted initiatives increase the effectiveness of the comics collections. These initiatives should be shared through a collaborative network, including

³⁹ For a more in-depth discussion, refer to the panel *Biblioteche e autori* of the *Ti leggerei ovunque* conference (Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023).

libraries and schools, which should "utilize comics in educational situations and study it [...] as a specific medium and language" (H). Some responses reveal the importance of the possibility of using comics for educational purposes, not only to communicate social and historical issues. In fact, it is clear that raising awareness and promoting the medium goes through "a greater focus on the centrality of comics," precisely understood as a narrative form (H).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the findings presented, comics are an essential asset for libraries and vice versa. Notably, introducing a comics section can lead to increased circulation, diversification, and number of patrons. Conversely, libraries play an essential role in promoting comics, helping spread awareness of the medium, and enhancing its potential as an educational and cultural tool. Libraries should promote comics as a narrative and artistic form, as well as an educational tool or simple entertainment, unhinging the view of comics as only or primarily as children's stuff. This, however, must be helped by a greater and more accomplished integration of comics within the national library system so that the medium would no longer be seen or perceived as an exceptionality, an alien body, or an eternal novelty.

In fact, today, the breakthrough of comics in the Italian library is no longer a new phenomenon. However, it has gained more and more relevance in the last few years and is evolving, paralleling society and readership habits and tastes. Library comics collections – historically focused on a young audience – are changing, and the users are diversifying regarding the genres and socio-demographic profiles. This evolution, the increasing cultural recognition of comics, and its growing economic relevance made or should make this medium a must-have for any library. As a prominent agent of the contemporary cultural debate, as well as a long-standing and relevant presence in the Italian landscape, comics ask today for better recognition in the library system, more decisive and structural interventions, better tools, and new rules, and to put it in a more prosaic way, more funds. It is not easy.

As mentioned, the Italian library system has been subject to heavy funding reductions for years, if not decades, as it has been afflicted, as Valenza notes, by interference, bureaucracy, lack of economic investment, increased voluntary labor, precarization, and in essence, scarcity of funds, means and prospects" (2021, 48): this makes the work of Italian libraries and librarians arduous. However, beyond these difficulties, the network of public libraries is Italy's most widespread cultural structure, albeit not homogeneously across the territory (Istat 2021). Moreover, as Fagiolani states, libraries are

a real 'point of reference' in neighborhoods and cities for 'cultural growth,' for the strengthening of 'positive social relations,' in general, for the 'well-being' of people (children, adults, the elderly, students, workers, scholars, etc.). Perceived as 'close,' 'welcoming,' and 'safe' places, libraries are configured as a real 'growth opportunity' (2021, 8).

That of cataloging, which may seem like an abstract problem, adds to the economic difficulties. Asked about the possibility of networking, the CFP AZ director replied as follows:

We promoted a meeting, a network of comics cultural places, private libraries, specialized libraries, and comics libraries. Broaden the thinking to museum spaces [...]. So many realities have come up over the years. They are too diverse realities and struggling with their organization and funding problems. We can't share collections if they are cataloged differently. More effort is needed, and more help is needed to carry on the reflections (Ginevra in Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 6:40:33).

Against the backdrop of this challenging economic and administrative context, but also within this fundamental cultural and social infrastructure, comics represent both a resource and a particular challenge for libraries with specific critical issues in addition to the more general ones. Some of these difficulties – concerning, for example, classification criteria and management of exhibition space – reflect similar problems recognizable in the other international studies cited here, while others are specific to the Italian context.

Regarding the whole national library system, some aspects seem to be particularly relevant:

- The lack of a centralized policy and ministerial guidelines related to comics acquisitions (both through donations and buying) added to the insufficient economic resources at the disposal of the libraries.
- The lack of trained comics professionals, full-time and not part-time or voluntary workers, who are thus well integrated into the library system.

As for the second point, comics acquisition seems to be conducted based on the specific and previous knowledge of the medium and the market by the librarians, who are fans and passionate. This probably depends on the lack of centralized and univocal training – that is not totally absent but seems occasional and on a local rather than national basis – of the professionals and the relevant presence of volunteer workers. This is the case, for example, at the *Biblioteca delle Nuvole* – which has cataloged just 5000 comics out of the 60000 that make up the entire library collection.⁴⁰ In this library, "all workers involved in cataloging, lending, and all activities within the facility (including classes, lectures, and comics discussions) are exclusively volunteers – in some cases, redundant workers – who lend their labor for free in their spare time" (Rota 2022).

The lack of adequately trained staff could also be reflected in some problems when acquiring and cataloging comics, as, for example, managing DDC could be challenging for volunteer workers. Furthermore, as noted by Ginevra (Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 26:55) and Righi (Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 39:15), comics librarians need better and more specific training.

Regarding the first point, initiatives like the ministerial technical committee on comics and funding opportunities like *Promozione fumetto* seemed a step forward. However, the first has stalled, while the second's exceptional and transitory nature does not allow long-term planning. The lack of clear ministerial guidelines could be filled by the works of private associations involved in providing comics selections and suggestions for libraries. However, this type of support seems to be missing in Italy, or at least, it is not clearly recognizable regarding the reliability and authority of the sources, even though there are examples of these kinds of associations and support groups. If there is a lack of coordination at the national level, the individual local entities often organize themselves, as in the case of the Milan Library System mentioned above.

Although this problem weakly emerges from the survey, it is easy to imagine that preserving comics is not always easy, especially considering the fragility of some old editions. However, it is a critical issue to consider, especially in light of the relevant weight that donations from private collections have. Therefore, the problem arises of finding a balance between preservation – including the medium's historical memory – and the comics' free enjoyment. The latter goal is more easily achieved through acquiring more solid and recent – but often more expensive – book-format reprints of old works.

Intending to bring comics out of the confines of pure entertainment, stepping outside a vision that puts children and adolescents at the center of comics enjoyment is necessary. It should always be remembered that education in the 'language' of comics is not only about the youngest and cannot be delegated to or focused only on schools (Quaianni Manuzzato, Tonfoni, and Tosti 2023 6:45:23). Therefore, activities such as events, workshops, and competitions, which can bring people first to comics and then to libraries, are welcome. Unfortunately, these events are primarily designed for a young audience. It could be possible to do more and better, following the track of what happens, for example, in the USA where libraries organize little comic-cons (Baume 2017; MacDonald 2014). These festivals attract hundreds if not thousands of participants, making

⁴⁰ Data are available on the library website: <https://www.bibliotecadellenuvole.it/catalogo/>.

peripheral libraries more attractive and helping people who have difficulties reaching far and sometimes very expensive conventions. Moreover, running these activities within a fragile system – both economically and labor-wise – as the library system entails a human and economic burden that cannot be overlooked.

Finally, the involvement of comics publishers seems to be a vital aspect to be increased. According to Istat (2022), promoting reading in the territory through initiatives in schools, libraries, bookstores, and cultural venues is essential for more than one in ten publishers (12.8%). An equally significant share of operators (18.4%) report the expansion and reshaping of offerings as a strategic objective to intercept new target readers. In addition, support for enhancing heritage and disseminating public reading libraries is among the objectives considered a priority for promoting the publishing industry. Assuming the comics' growing importance in Italy, closer collaboration between libraries and publishers could benefit both stakeholders.

For example, concerning the acquisitions, donations by private patrons are a relevant part of the library comics collection. Donations by publishing houses are – beyond the legal obligation – equally so too, but they could be incremented, especially because, as said, libraries can be an effective marketing and displaying tool for their products. The role of publishers should also not be limited to donations but could extend to events, educational meetings, etc., to organizing small comic-cons. Bringing library users closer to comics could create new readers and buyers and build a broader and diversified audience, also for the publishers.

NEW RESEARCH HORIZONS

The research presented here is an initial investigation of a complex and evolving phenomenon. Although it is exploratory research on a still underdeveloped field, the small number of respondents to the survey cannot sufficiently reflect the phenomenon's complexity. Future research must involve more respondents and deeply explore the complex relationships between comics and Italian libraries. In particular, the demographic, gender, and geographic characteristics of comics library readership should be better investigated. Users' reading habits will have to be investigated in-depth, as well as the specific problems related to the digitization of comics and the management of digital lending and, more generally, how the library holdings of comics can be increased and made more homogeneous and easily accessible throughout the country.

Another point that deserves to be investigated is how comics may or may not enhance a fragile but essential system such as the Italian library, which is very important and relevant to its users (Chiessi 2011; 2012). Appropriate studies should be conducted on the librarians' role in the footprint of what has been done in other countries (Berthou 2015). Future research should include the precarization of librarians' work in Italy, whether their role as mediators in the choice of comics is more or less effective – as well as what kind of mediation is best applied to avoid the risk, probably already in place, feared by Ciment that this role is played by "a number of mediators who seem cruelly (and uniformly) absent in comics" (2007).

Finally, specific trends, whether emerging, established, or growing, such as manga and its management, will need to be explored in greater depth.

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APPENDIX

Survey questions

Question	Type of question: MC (multiple choice) or OE (Open-Ended).	Number of respondents (out of 9)
Was your collection created due to an individual's initiative, or was it the result of a group's choices?	MC - An individual's initiative - A group's choices	9
Have you consulted any other libraries or institutions involved in disseminating comic works before you started?	MC - Yes - No	9
Do you have a dedicated budget available to purchase the volumes?	MC - Yes - No - In part	9
What percentage of the budget is devoted to buying comics out of the overall budget? How do the higher costs of comic volumes affect spending?	OE	9
Is the acquiring of the volumes the result of donations?	MC - Totally - In part	9
What are the supply channels?	OE	9
How do you select comics to buy?	MC - Associations - Book clubs - Websites	9

	- Institutional channels	
Do you receive donations from publishers?	MC - Yes - No	
What are the criteria for cataloging works?	OE	9
Do you think the Dewey code is suitable for the medium's specificity?	MC - Yes - No	9
If the answer to the previous question is no, give reasons.	OE	7
What fiction and non-fiction genres (e.g., memoir, graphic journalism, etc) are most represented in your comic collection?	OE	8
Do you have a comics nonfiction section?	MC - Yes - No	9
In your library, comics are on display:	MC - In a separate section - Integrated into the main collection	9
What are the display criteria adopted?	OE	9
After introducing comics, have you noticed an increase in lending and user circulation, both in the number of users and their type?	MC - Yes - No	9
By what percentage have loans increased?	OE	6
How has the type of users who attend and use the loan service changed, if at all?	OE	7
Do particular formats and paper specifications (oversized or oversized volumes, recognizability of volumes from the coast rather than from the cover, albums, book design, etc.) affect display management?	MC - Yes - No	9

If the answer is yes, please specify how.	OE	4
Do particle formats and paper specifications (e.g., fragility of volumes) affect loan management?	MC - Yes - No	9
If the answer is yes, please specify how.	OE	5
Do you organize initiatives to raise awareness or create a debate around this format/medium?	MC - Yes - No	9
Specifically, what kind of initiatives are organized?	OE	6
Do you use comics in your collection to narrate events related to actual facts or contemporary ones?	MC - Yes - No	9
What is your target audience?	OE	7
How did and how does your audience perceive your comic collection? Has there been mistrust, discussion, etc.?	OE	8
Comics are communicated and perceived:	MC - as something 'serious' - only as entertainment and diversion	8
Do you also use comics to create science-related or other educational pathways (raising awareness of environmental and social issues, local community history, etc)?	MC - Yes - No	9
How?	OE	6
Do you also use comics as a medium for multimedia narratives related to specific areas or events?	MC - Yes - No	9
What kind of events?	OE	4
Are you trying to broaden your target audience?	MC - Yes - No	9
If yes, how and through what initiatives?	OE	8
What initiatives do you think would increase the	OE	8

effectiveness of your comics collection?		
Do you have any suggestions for increasing the dissemination and enjoyment of this part of your collection?	OE	7

